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‘To give myself up to a serious examination’:  
Forms of Dissent in  
Seventeenth-Century  
Nonconformist Spiritual Autobiographies.

Barry Hall

PhD

2011

‘To give myself up to a serious examination’:  
Forms of Dissent in  
Seventeenth-Century  
Nonconformist Spiritual Autobiographies.

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the ways in which seventeenth-century nonconformist writers used the Puritan model of spiritual autobiography to record their individual forms of dissent. Spiritual autobiography is read against the political and religious turmoil that existed in England in the aftermath of the Civil Wars and during the subsequent Restoration. Through a study of four dissenting writers I show how a genre seen usually as a record of spiritual crisis and ultimate reconciliation, was also used as a way of communicating gendered, psychological, domestic, and religious dissent by writers from the extreme margins of society.

The argument differs from other studies of spiritual autobiography in that I situate the genre beyond the strict confines of soteriology and adopt an interdisciplinary approach that deploys literary, historical, and theoretical readings. I draw upon the theories of Jean-François Lyotard in order to illustrate a mood analogous to postmodernism apparent in the nonconformist psyche as well as to contextualise the wider dissent shown to exist in the seventeenth century. By applying Lyotard's concepts of Svelteness, competing Phrase Regimens, and the Differend to spiritual autobiographies by John Bunyan, Agnes Beaumont, Laurence Clarkson, and Richard Norwood this study raises questions with regard to assumptions associated with the genre, the context in which they were written, and so presents new readings of often marginal texts.

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Finally, I'd like to thank my family for their belief and understanding and especially Leanne for her baffling levels of emotional and practical support.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Alan Hall.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

# Introduction

This thesis explores the ways in which seventeenth-century nonconformist writers used the Puritan model of spiritual autobiography to record their individual forms of dissent. Spiritual autobiography is read against the political and religious turmoil that existed in England in the aftermath of the Civil Wars and during the subsequent Restoration. Through a study of four dissenting writers I show how a genre seen usually as a record of spiritual crisis and ultimate reconciliation, was also employed as a means of communicating gendered, psychological, domestic, and religious dissent by writers from the extreme margins of society.

The argument differs from other studies of spiritual autobiography in that I situate the genre beyond the strict confines of soteriology and adopt an interdisciplinary approach that deploys literary, historical, and theoretical readings. I draw upon the theories of Jean-François Lyotard in order to illustrate a mood analogous to postmodernism apparent in the nonconformist psyche as well as to contextualise the wider sense of dissent shown to exist in the seventeenth century. By applying Lyotard's concepts of sveltiness, competing phrase regimens, and the differend to spiritual autobiographies by John Bunyan, Agnes Beaumont, Laurence Clarkson, and Richard Norwood this study raises questions with regard to assumptions associated with the genre, the context in which they were written, and so presents new readings of often marginal texts. I also interrogate the literary inheritance of spiritual autobiography: primarily the early novels of Daniel Defoe, and consider the extent to



which my reading of the antecedent seventeenth-century mode might affect our understanding of this later genre.

The seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography gives invaluable insight into the nonconformist tradition. A literary genre that espoused Calvinist predestinarian doctrine for radical groups like Independents, Fifth Monarchists, and Baptists, spiritual autobiographies present in often stark detail the fear, doubt, and hope that characterised the desperate search for evidence of salvation undertaken by devout men and women in the aftermath of the Civil Wars. The reason for their composition, the manner in which they were written and read, is all bound to the spiritual environment of the age. As N.H. Keeble has written, the nonconformist writer had a very specific agenda and was, ‘above all else concerned about the bearing of his theme upon the daily lives of his readers, and will expend his greatest energies on drawing out its implications for their behaviour. Whatever he writes about, he applies, practically, morally and spiritually.’<sup>1</sup> While undeniable, this didactic intent is overshadowed somewhat by the tendency of some writers of spiritual autobiographies to deviate from soteriological matters and – in some cases, inadvertently – present a deeply personal view of the world, explore the often painful psychological crises that accompanied such intense spiritual self-scrutiny, and write with startling honesty about marginalised, occasionally anarchic, sections of society. Far from being a pedantic form of spiritual record-keeping, these autobiographies begin to look more like the writings of highly individual people whose dissent runs deeper than we might have previously assumed.

This thesis will identify the forms of dissent alluded to in the spiritual autobiographies of four nonconformists writing in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. I will show how the stylistic model of the genre was used by extremely marginalized figures like Agnes Beaumont and Laurence Clarkson to record not only their soteriological assurance, and

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<sup>1</sup> N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity* (Leicester: Leicester University Press) 1987, p. 146.

indeed, I argue that the conversion process might not be an authoritative confirmation of grace at all, but also to provide a commentary on the domestic situation of men and women of the ‘middling sort’. This reading will assume a theoretical position based on the postmodern writing of Jean-François Lyotard, principally his notions of the differend and sveltteness, both of which would, as I argue, seem to be applicable to the texts and the historical context in which the texts under consideration here were written.

### **Predestination and the Spiritual Autobiography**

The importance of the spiritual autobiography to the nonconformist sectarian community in the middle decades of the seventeenth century cannot be overestimated. For religious dissenters like John Bunyan, himself a ‘mechanick preacher’ at the First Independent Church at Bedford, written testimony of the visitation of God’s grace would have been a condition of membership of a nonconformist congregation. Indeed, as Vera Camden has said, the doctrines of the Bedford Church were ‘moderately Calvinistic, tolerant in matters of baptism and communion, while adamantly predestinarian in their emphasis on the need for calling and public testimony of conversion for its members’<sup>2</sup>. The spiritual autobiography met the necessary soteriological requirements by adapting to the Calvinist leanings of the congregation until there emerged a set of conventions to which writers of these religious testimonials adhered. This classic model is perhaps best illustrated in Bunyan’s own *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*<sup>3</sup> but the structural template can be seen in many other examples from the Civil War and Restoration periods.

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<sup>2</sup> Vera Camden, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press) 1992, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press) 1962. All further quotations will be from this edition.

It is unsurprising that predestination dominated proceedings at these meetings as well as informing the structural content of spiritual autobiographies. Although Calvin himself did not place overdue emphasis upon the doctrine, and as François Wendel states quite clearly, Calvin, ‘only rarely speaks of predestination except in the four chapters that are devoted to it’<sup>4</sup>, dissenting groups like the Baptists seized upon its implications and it became the central focus of their beliefs. Indeed, John Bunyan’s later theology would come to rely even more heavily upon predestination, especially when addressing his congregation. As Richard L. Greaves has written, ‘In the sermon to Gammon’s congregation the Calvinist doctrine of predestination is presented starkly, without Bunyan’s typical softening of the edges,’<sup>5</sup> and Stuart Sim highlights the ‘Calvinist doctrines of election and justification by faith, that [are] central to Bunyan’s narrative practice.’<sup>6</sup> For an already radicalized section of society, such a doctrine must have seemed as much a symptom of, as it was a response to, its spiritual and psychological malady.

The impersonality of a predetermined spiritual state – an individual’s election or reprobation was decided before birth – meant that emphasis was turned not to human behaviour but rather to the assessment of evidence, however unfounded, of grace. This human element became the source of much despair, hope, and paranoia as dissenters feverishly sought for signs of their election. It was also the basis of increasingly left-field sects – particularly the millenarian Fifth Monarchists and the so-called Ranters, a loose conglomeration of individuals like Abiezer Coppe, Joseph Salmon, and Laurence Clarkson – whose adherence to a doctrine where secular behaviour had no impact on one’s spiritual status was taken to spectacular extremes. The impact of Ranter beliefs has been discussed by

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<sup>4</sup> François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (London: Collins) 1974, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2002, p. 598.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Sim, ““Safe for Those for Whom it is to be Safe”: Salvation and Damnation in Bunyan’s Fiction”, in Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (eds.), *John Bunyan and his England 1628-88* (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press), p.149.

A. L. Morton, who writes that such doctrine ‘might lead to a mysticism which found God in everyone: equally it might lead to a virtual materialism which in practice dispensed with him altogether.’<sup>7</sup> Predestination also led many more men and women to depressive insularity and to a sense of insecurity in their faith over which they had no control as Stuart Sim suggests: ‘justification by works [actions] is to the Calvinist a self-deluding notion which will ultimately be cruelly exposed’<sup>8</sup>. Exposure often came through written testimony, and the self-perpetuating internal conflict visited upon dissenting writers, especially the most enduring exponent John Bunyan, will be investigated in chapter one of this study.

During any close reading of *Grace Abounding* or indeed any of the Puritan conversion narratives, it soon becomes apparent that the term ‘spiritual autobiography’ is a misleading one. The ‘startling autobiographical omissions’<sup>9</sup> of Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* are not peculiar to that example of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography but the relatively narrow range of experiential material is still rather jarring to the reader expecting a more historical ‘life’ of the author. John Bunyan’s eloquent record of his spiritual crisis is the most enduring of the autobiographical texts to emerge from the English Revolution and is certainly the model against which other examples of the genre are judged. I will discuss the implications of the existence of a formalized autobiographical structure in a later part of this thesis but it is worth noting at the outset that by the publication of *Grace Abounding* in 1666, a rigid set of stylistic expectations accompanied the act of writing a spiritual autobiography. The spiritual autobiography should be thought of as a record of soteriological signs, of evidence that the individual has received God’s grace, and John Stachniewski’s suggestion

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<sup>7</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart) 1970, p.74.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Sim, *Negotiations with Paradox: Narrative Practice & Narrative Form in Bunyan & Defoe* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf) 1990, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski with Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1998, p. xiii.

that the act of writing one constituted an act of ‘scrupulous self-reading’<sup>10</sup> would seem to be pertinent. As an early example of an inward-looking autobiographical narrative, *Grace Abounding* falls far short of our expectations regarding personal history, but in terms of Calvinist, predestinarian writing, it conforms to convention and successfully communicates the required sentiment dictated by nonconformist doctrine.

Roger Sharrock suggests that the autobiographical material excluded by Bunyan constitutes ‘practically all the events and experiences which are usually thought to be of interest in a secular autobiography’<sup>11</sup>. As a close follower of predestinarian doctrine, the concept of a secular existence would be for Bunyan an untenable position from which to compose an autobiographical narrative. The all-consuming, at times rather desperate, search for evidence of election renders all matters not directly concerned with it, superfluous. For Bunyan – and dozens of his contemporaries – the spiritual autobiography is nothing more than a record of compelling evidence pertaining to salvation. In *Grace Abounding* he explores the extremes of his psychological state – which fluctuates between mania and depression – as well as providing reportage on the sectarian community which again says as much about his own thought-processes as it does about the wider nonconformist world. Vera J. Camden goes as far as to posit that ‘Bunyan places his account of his encounter with the Ranters following his meeting with the poor women of Bedford. The Bedford Baptists and the Ranters project the extremes of his own bipolarity’.<sup>12</sup> The psychological turmoil is of course a by-product of the Calvinist preoccupation with predestination, and the spiritual autobiography was supposed to record evidence of election and little else. That said, it must be remembered that Bunyan experienced a series of traumatic events during his adolescence

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<sup>10</sup> John Stachniewski, Introduction to John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Sharrock, ‘Spiritual Autobiography: Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*’, in, *John Bunyan and his England, 1628-88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W.R. Owens, and Stuart Sim (London: Hambledon Press) 1990, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Vera J. Camden, ‘Blasphemy and the Problem of Self in *Grace Abounding*’, *Bunyan Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1989, p. 8.

– not least the death of his mother and the rapid remarriage of his father – so his psychological state could probably be said to have been weakened before the spiritual awakening and the attendant crises that transpired in the wake of it. It is interesting to consider how much of an impact predestinarian doctrine had on an already emotionally displaced individual.

Camden again refers to Bunyan as being, ‘a politically and psychologically evolving personality in crisis’<sup>13</sup>, and it is crisis – secular as well as spiritual – that links the otherwise very different personalities of all the writers under consideration here. Bunyan’s internal doubt, Beaumont’s precarious status in society, Clarkson’s discontent with religion, and Norwood’s struggle to find his place in the world all inform the respective spiritual autobiographies these men and women would write. The conversion narrative could be a one-dimensional exercise in soteriological forensics, but, as I shall suggest here, each individual writer also betrays much about their subjective spirituality and the methods by which they attempt to overcome the obstacles arrayed against them.

## **Forms of Dissent**

I would argue that the spiritual autobiography offered the dissenting nonconformist writer more than a stylistic model with which to record evidence of election. Chapters two, three, and four provide a close reading of the works of three minor writers – two of whom were contemporaries of Bunyan – whose written testimony show not only how versatile a genre spiritual autobiography could be, but also how important these subjective narratives are when we consider the wealth of historical, societal, gendered, and psychological insight they contain. While these other texts share some of the qualities found in the classic model, they

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<sup>13</sup> Vera J. Camden, ‘Young Man Bunyan’ in Vera J. Camden (ed.), *Trauma and Transformation: The Political Progress of John Bunyan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2008, p. 49.

display very different content in terms of the author's experiences and lend themselves to the kind of postmodern critical reading attempted in the current study.

Agnes Beaumont's *Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*<sup>14</sup> is little more than a close reading of a single episode that occurs within the space of a few weeks. Her spiritual autobiography is ostensibly a record of her triumph over persecution at the hands of her accusatory society; Beaumont's allusion to the wider world, even to her own experiences beyond the events leading up to and those in the immediate aftermath of the death of her father, is almost non-existent. Despite the obvious limitations with regard to the scope of her writing, Beaumont is able to capture her own life and her position within her Church and her society by narrating that single event in a profoundly subjective style, in often emotive detail. Studies of female nonconformist writing have generally, and understandably, tended to adopt a feminist line. The work of the Presbyterian Hannah Allen in particular, whose spiritual autobiography, *A Narrative of God's Gracious Dealings with that Choice Christian Mrs Hannah Allen* appeared in 1683, has attracted notable critical attention in recent years<sup>15</sup>, much of it gendered in approach. Agnes Beaumont has remained a marginal figure despite her association with Bunyan – indeed, her attachment to Bunyan forms a great deal of the little written about her – and yet her narrative, as chapter two will demonstrate, certainly warrants a theoretical reading.

*The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont* is an extraordinary text that challenges the conventions of spiritual autobiography and records with eloquence domestic dissent in rural early modern England. As such, Beaumont's writing provides a more

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<sup>14</sup> Vera J. Camden (ed.), *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press) 1992. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from this edition.

<sup>15</sup> In particular see, Elspeth Graham, 'Authority, Resistance and Loss: Gendered Difference in the Writings of John Bunyan and Hannah Allen' in Anne Laurence et al (ed.) *John Bunyan and His England 1628 – 88* (London: The Hambledon Press) 1990; Elspeth Graham et al (ed.) *Her Own Life: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth Century Englishwomen* (London and New York: Routledge) 1989; Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1649-88* (London: Virago) 1988.

confrontational example of the differend – the conflict here being as external as Bunyan’s was internal. Indeed, Beaumont would appear to be in a spiritually healthy position during the various crises outlined in her narrative; in many ways her spirituality is the only constant element in her life threatened only by external, secular events. This in itself raises questions relating to the differing experience of nonconformists with regard to gender and these are also explored in chapter three. If Beaumont’s text dissents from the assumptions attached to spiritual autobiography, however, what exactly are those assumptions, and on what are they based?

The rambling, sometimes baffling, stylistic quality of Laurence Clarkson’s *Lost Sheep Found*<sup>16</sup> is to some degree the antithesis of Beaumont’s lean and thoughtful writing and yet Clarkson’s intent is just as narrow in scope. Here, the Calvinist model of spiritual autobiography is reworked to record Clarkson’s meandering passage through sectarian worship. Nigel Smith notes that ‘It is no surprise that the abolition of episcopal government, the collapse of censorship, and the absence of a national policy of church government throughout the Interregnum contributed to the expansion and fragmentation [of dissenters and sectarians]’<sup>17</sup> and it is this fragmentation we see manifested in *Lost Sheep Found*. Clarkson’s unfulfilling and in many respects self-perpetuating movement through a series of often conflicting ideologies brings to mind observations regarding the puritan self made by Thomas H. Luxon. He writes that ‘Puritan Christianity requires a new self, a self reborn outside of history, or more precisely, a self that is born by virtue of being parted from history, conceived and carried in the “fleshly” womb of history’s nonbeing, and, following the “travail” (also

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<sup>16</sup> Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found* (Exeter: The Rota at the University of Exeter) 1974. Again, quotes are from this edition unless stated otherwise.

<sup>17</sup> Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion 1640 – 1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1989, p. 3.



“travell” or pilgrimage) of worldly gestation, new-born into ahistorical reality.’<sup>18</sup> Clarkson’s detachment from an established puritan existence (he is, as he puts it, a *Lost Sheep Found*) is certainly suggestive of *spiritual* ‘nonbeing’ and the subjective religious uncertainty of *Grace Abounding* is here given a more external application as Clarkson attempts (unsuccessfully) to find a satisfactory outlet for his spiritual vision. A text that was written a generation before Bunyan’s classic model, Richard Norwood’s *Confessions*<sup>19</sup> adheres, ostensibly at least, to the conventions of the Puritan conversion narrative. It is, in terms of structure and stylistics, closest to *Grace Abounding* and yet Norwood’s personal history shares little with that of Bunyan. *Confessions* gives a startling account of a man whose geographical situation is as cosmopolitan and exotic as Bunyan’s or especially Beaumont’s is insular; it situates his spiritual crises within this wider context and shows that the desperate search for soteriological evidence was not confined to the narrow margins of Revolutionary or Restoration England.

These four individual voices have been chosen to illustrate the diversity of dissenting writing – even, in the case of Bunyan and Beaumont, from within the same sect – and also to show how versatile a form the spiritual autobiography was. By examining these texts in relation to other works by contemporary writers like Abiezer Coppe, Anna Trapnell, and Sara Davy among others, I will provide evidence that will demonstrate the historical importance of these conversion narratives and posit that their remit went far beyond any record of spiritual conversion. Indeed, I aim to show that rather than confirming the elect status of the author, they cast doubt upon their soteriological state and underline the mood of something like postmodernism at work in seventeenth century England. I will consider the impact the events of the revolutionary years had on the dissenting sects and how nonconformist writers

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas H. Luxon, *Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press) 1995, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, in John Stachniewski (ed.) *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics) 1998. All quotations are from this edition.

documented their experiences in spiritual autobiographies as individual spiritual radicals. As Nigel Smith has written,

For them [dissenting nonconformists] it was a search for truth, grace, and, in some cases, perfection, separate from the impure and the ignorant. From the outside this often seemed like the presumptuous rejection of a divinely ordained social order and the endangering of spiritual well-being in the sight of God.<sup>20</sup>

In this thesis I want to adopt a position that refutes the traditional view of spiritual autobiographies as being documents of spiritual assurance, and offer the view that this is an unsatisfactory appraisal; I will illustrate how many of these texts – Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* included – are more often than not unsuccessful in providing compelling evidence of grace. This will provide justification for my use of a postmodern critical model based on the writing of Jean-Francois Lyotard, particularly his notion of the Differend<sup>21</sup>. Studies of dissenting spiritual writers from the seventeenth century have generally – probably necessarily – adopted either an historical or theological perspective<sup>22</sup>. With a few notable exceptions even major figures like John Bunyan have escaped theoretical attention. I would argue that the turbulent years in the immediate aftermath of two Civil Wars, regicide, and political and religious revolution is more than suggestive of being in a state akin to postmodernism – particularly with regard to the apparent seventeenth-century distrust in grand narratives – and that spiritual autobiographies provided those caught up in the resulting uncertainty with a mode of writing that could successfully document this overriding sense of doubt.

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<sup>20</sup> Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by George Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press) 1988.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the following important studies: G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1965; Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford, Oxford University Press) 1988; William Y. Tindall, *John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher* (New York: Russell & Russell) 1964; Richard L. Greaves, *John Bunyan* (Abingdon) 1969. Bunyan has, in recent years attracted some theoretical attention, and many of the essays found in the following two volumes assume a theoretical position: *Trauma and Transformation: The Political Progress of John Bunyan*, ed. Vera Camden (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2008, and, *John Bunyan and his England 1628-88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W.R. Owens and Stuart Sim (London and Roncerverte: The Hambledon Press) 1990.

## The Critical Model

The unwillingness of a large minority of the population of mid seventeenth-century England to accept homogenous rule whether in terms of government or church, led to a mood of scepticism that will be seen to be as analogous to that adopted by postmodern theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard's most influential book – 1984's *The Postmodern Condition*<sup>23</sup> - described a crisis of legitimation in science, economics, and the arts and posited that, far from being a negative situation, this state should be welcomed and seen as the natural reaction to modernist positivism: 'Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.'<sup>24</sup> This statement could have come from any of the more extreme radical sectaries like the Ranter Abiezer Coppe whose prose could certainly excite a similar sense of revolution, for instance: 'Howle, rich men, for the miseries that are (just now) coming upon you, the rust of your silver is rising up in judgement against you, burning your flesh like fire',<sup>25</sup> and Lyotard's writing certainly shares the sentiment of dissent with that of nonconformists like Laurence Clarkson whose *Lost Sheep Found* will be examined in detail in chapter four.<sup>26</sup>

Lyotard's postmodernism stresses the limitations of unifying concepts. He instead favours scepticism towards forms of authority and towards assumptions based on institutionalised hegemonic thought. As Stuart Sim writes, for Lyotard, we have:

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<sup>23</sup> The book was originally published in France as *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* in 1979 and then in translation by Manchester University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press) 1984, p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *Selected Writings* (London, Aporia Press) 1987, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> For a similar approach to the writings of seventeenth century dissenters, although with less emphasis upon spiritual autobiography, see Stuart Sim and David Walker's, *Bunyan and Authority: The Rhetoric of Dissent and the Legitimation Crisis in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Peter Lang) 2000, and their *Discourse of Sovereignty, Hobbes to Fielding* (Aldershot: Ashgate) 2003.

outgrown our need for universal theories: grand narratives, metanarratives, as he dubs them. We must turn instead to ‘little narratives’, those designed for specifically delimited objectives, as a way of reconstructing and revitalising our political processes. The *evenements* would be one such example of a little narrative, where workers and students joined together in a loose coalition to protest against certain French government policies. Postmodernism as conceived of by Lyotard is a rejection of universal theories (Marxism, for example), and the authoritarianism that, for Lyotard, inevitably accompanies them’.<sup>27</sup>

Distrust in universal explanations and, more importantly, the authority behind them, places emphasis instead upon individual behaviour and the little narratives that arise from subjective needs and experience. In the case of art – and in particular, writing – the redundancy of the grand narrative becomes even more evident and has obvious implications for writing like spiritual autobiographies, coming as they did from a period of great spiritual and political uncertainty. As Lyotard states:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.<sup>28</sup>

Freedom from authority (or at least the compulsion to be critical of it, to question it) is, for Lyotard, an essential attribute of postmodern thinking, and I believe this scepticism is essentially the same as that which drove devout individuals in the nonconformist community to such intense soul-searching and extreme forms of dissent. It is worth mentioning at this point the critical engagement Lyotard’s writing has engendered if only to illustrate the controversy surrounding the theoretical model I have chosen to employ and the close parallels between it and the conflict experienced by the radical dissenters examined here.

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<sup>27</sup> Stuart Sim, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy: the New Scepticism* (Aldershot, Ashgate) 2000, pp. 15-16.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

One of Lyotard's most energetic critics, Jürgen Habermas<sup>29</sup>, was himself the target of a sustained attack in *The Postmodern Condition* where Lyotard reflects bluntly that Habermas's 'cause is good, but the argument is not'<sup>30</sup> and takes issue with what he sees as Habermas's insistence on a search for universal truth, a particularly relevant dialogue in the light of my study:

[I]t seems neither possible, nor even prudent, to follow Habermas in orienting our treatment of the problem of legitimation in the direction of a search for universal consensus... This double observation (the heterogeneity of the rules and the search for dissent) destroys a belief that still underlies Habermas's research, namely, that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the "moves" permitted in all language games and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in its contributing to that emancipation.<sup>31</sup>

In his foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, Fredric Jameson writes that:

Habermas's vision of an evolutionary social leap into a new type of rational society, defined in communicational terms as "the communication community of those affected, who as participants in a practical discourse test the validity claims of norms and, to the extent that they accept them with reasons, arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are 'right,' is here explicitly rejected by Lyotard as the unacceptable remnant of a "totalizing" philosophical tradition and as the valorization of conformist, when not "terrorist," ideals of consensus.<sup>32</sup>

The notion of a 'totalizing' tradition in terms of radical dissenting doctrine is something I will go on to investigate during the course of this thesis and Lyotard's call to reject such grand narratives will be seen to be invaluable to the reappraisal of spiritual autobiographies posited here.

The most appealing element of Lyotard's thinking in relation to a study of seventeenth-century nonconformism is its provocative fluidity, the lack of absolute responses,

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<sup>29</sup> See Jürgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press) 1987, and also Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso) 1991, for further critiques of postmodernism and Lyotard.

<sup>30</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Foreword', *The Postmodern Condition*, p. x.

of answers even, to direct problems. When Lyotard claims that, 'I judge. But if I am asked by what criteria do I judge, I will have no answer to give'<sup>33</sup>, he is providing both a playful statement on the lack of authority of grand narratives and the necessity of little narratives, and also a parallel to the predestinarian predicament as displayed by Bunyan in *Grace Abounding*: 'I will conclude I am not altogether faithless, though I know not what Faith is'<sup>34</sup>. Similarly, when Lyotard contends that, 'a rational politics is no longer admissible'<sup>35</sup> his sentiment is sympathetic with that of the writer of the spiritual autobiography who, in the midst of an acute internal spiritual dichotomy, records rather poignantly that:

Hereupon though in myne own apprehension I seemed to be wholly both body and soul in the hands of Satan and no ways able to move or help my self yet the Lord enabled me to desire earnestly to renounce and detest Satan.<sup>36</sup>

Rationality is often subservient to the effects of mania or depression in the psychology of nonconformist dissenters. Lack of authoritative politics or religion certainly results in crises of legitimation in keeping with a mood of postmodernism. There is undeniable interest in observing such a state of postmodern condition in a supposedly 'metaspiritual' form like spiritual autobiography. The overall objective of this study is to situate spiritual autobiography within the mood of postmodernism that existed in England between 1640 and 1688, and I'd like now to propose a rationale for employing this critical apparatus in a reading of nonconformist autobiographical texts from seventeenth-century England.

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, Trans. Wlad Godzich, (Manchester: Manchester University Press) 1985, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, in John Stachniewski (ed.), *Grace Abounding and Other Spiritual Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics) 1998, p. 149.

## Postmodern Approaches to Radical Dissent

One of Jean-François Lyotard's most intriguing theories – his notion of Svelteness – is exemplified by a figure like Laurence Clarkson, and this theoretical model provides the critical framework against which I read Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found*. Clarkson's position as a contemporary of John Bunyan, and a member of at least one sectarian group Bunyan was reacting against, means we can situate this relatively forgotten writer within the wider context of nonconformist England. Clarkson's colourful narrative has been described by A.L. Morton as 'a book almost unknown, but in my judgement of greater intrinsic interest than Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*'<sup>37</sup> and it certainly provides invaluable insight into the psychology of a nonconformist faced with the breakdown of a hegemonic Church. *Lost Sheep Found* is Clarkson's spiritual autobiography and is a record of his itinerant movement through almost every dissenting sect as he abandons each one in turn in the hope of finding spiritual certainty. Clarkson's reaction to the failings of these sects suggests a postmodern scepticism and a general distrust of grand narratives, and as such I provide a reading of *Lost Sheep Found* informed by Lyotard's 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question'<sup>38</sup> in which Lyotard posits that one must employ 'flexibility, speed, metamorphic capacity' in order to resist the dominance of whatever metanarrative one might be threatened by. The concept has been described as one that 'attempts to capture the flexibility and lack of dogmatic belief found in the postmodern individual, when freed from the constraints of grand narrative (or universal theory)',<sup>39</sup> and its applicability not only to Clarkson, but to the dissenting tradition as a whole – and to spiritual autobiography in particular – will become apparent. Clarkson's resistance to unthinking belief in the doctrines of Baptists, Ranters, Presbyterians, and others is symptomatic of one who is svelte, and his extraordinary

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<sup>37</sup> A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters* (London: Lawrence & Wishart) 1970, p.115.

<sup>38</sup> Published in Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (London: UCL Press) 1993.

<sup>39</sup> Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (Cambridge: Icon Books) 1998, p. 369.

adaptability, his sense of subjectivity when faced with competing little narratives is certainly suggestive of a postmodern approach.

Although this study deploys a broadly postmodern approach to nonconformist spiritual writing, it is Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of the differend that is most applicable, specifically to John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. Lyotard sees the differend as being a state in which there can be no source of legitimation, where no hegemony can dominate with any real potency:

...a differend would be a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both if neither side admits this rule)...<sup>40</sup>

A differend could certainly be said to exist in England in the aftermath of the Civil Wars. As Stuart Sim and David Walker have claimed, the mid seventeenth-century

is a postmodern condition exacerbated by the continuing belief in resolution on traditional lines, where the expectation is that one party, wielding its grand narrative, eventually is destined to win out and impose its will on all its adversaries. Even where such resolution is actually achieved, as in the case of the Restoration settlement (or as Ronald Hutton would have it, "settlements"), it is at best an illusory one that will constantly be undercut by the realities of the situation.<sup>41</sup>

The political, religious, and social upheaval of the Revolution had left a climate – albeit a temporary one – in which, as Christopher Hill writes, 'ordinary people were freer from the authority of Church and social superiors than they had ever been before, or were for a long time to be again.'<sup>42</sup> The lack of legitimacy in almost every aspect of life was a major factor

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<sup>40</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xi.

<sup>41</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1991, p. 360.



in the rise of the sectarian movement – it certainly led to their continued toleration, at least during the 1650s – and, as a result, the dissenting individual as epitomised by Bunyan and his contemporaries. Writing about *Grace Abounding*, Nigel Smith reinforces this lack, this differend, suggesting that ‘Bunyan’s autobiography is one of continuous confrontation with a concretized Scripture which moulds his behaviour despite his successive revolts against the scripture’s authority.’<sup>43</sup> The differend, then, also exists at the subjective level, and this assumption is the basis of chapter two.

What I see as the increased dominance of the little narrative was to have lasting implications for authority. What Sim and Walker have called, ‘a clutch of competing political narratives jostling for attention, revealing a spectrum of response running from extreme political idealism, and even anarchism, at the one end to extreme political authoritarianism and traditionalism at the other’<sup>44</sup>, became, at a local, spiritual level, a melting pot of competing doctrines and increasingly radical ideas. To an extent, the sectarian dissenters were a reaction to an untenable authority as N.H. Keeble suggests:

Presbyterians and Independents, Baptists and Quakers would never have come, all alike, to accept the common designation ‘dissenter’ merely because Episcopalians and parliament willed it upon them... The penal legislation which followed upon the Act of Uniformity visited persecution upon nonconformists of whatever persuasion. They faced a common foe and endured a common plight.<sup>45</sup>

That said, the foundations of hegemonic political and religious authority in England were in a similarly fluid state and it would be misleading to suggest that the dissenters provided a unified rebellion to the Restoration. Although the Act of Uniformity essentially criminalised ‘Mechanick’ preachers like Bunyan, it was an attempt to establish some sort of religious orthodoxy in the face of what must have seemed like spiritual anarchy in the 1650s under the

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<sup>43</sup> Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 44.

Protectorate. Trevor Royle suggests that ‘spiritual chaos [in the 1650s] was a manifestation of England’s state after nine years of warfare which had seen the country divided and destroyed and its anointed ruler executed’<sup>46</sup>, and this, coupled with the growing number of millenarian sects and even more extreme agitators like Lodowick Muggleton<sup>47</sup> lends some sympathy to the crackdown that took place in the following decade. Extreme political authoritarianism like that perpetrated by the Restoration regime begins to look like over-compensation, a method of stemming the tide of radicalised sects and individuals and of re-establishing a grand narrative.

The sects were partly responsible for the gradual increase in the importance and realisation of the individual in religious life with spiritual autobiographies being a literary device providing an outlet for this burgeoning sense of self. My examination of John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* highlights the conflicts arising from this classic example of a spiritual autobiography, the result of intense and sustained self-examination. Bunyan’s desperate search for evidence of his election results in continual psychological pitfalls that, ironically, prevent him from attaining definite proof of his salvation. Michael Davies has touched upon this recently and his assertion that the shift towards rational moralism in religion, the scientific and philosophical developments, and most interestingly, the rise of the medical profession in Restoration England were viewed as ‘insidious threat[s]’ by nonconformists like Bunyan.

Effectively blurring the distinctions between Nonconformist faith and a medically verifiable insanity, the discourse of a new medical psychology lent greater authority

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<sup>46</sup> Trevor Royle, *Civil War: The Wars of the Three Kingdoms 1638-1660* (London: Abacus) 2005, p. 629.

<sup>47</sup> Lodowick Muggleton founded, along with John Reeve, the radical Muggletonian sect in 1652. The two claimed to be the Two Last Witnesses of Revelation, preached an internal spirituality, and questioned the existence of God. As Christopher Hill writes in *The World Turned Upside Down*, ‘We can sense... from Muggleton’s account how very boring the traditional idea of heaven seemed, how much less attractive than hell was terrifying. This too would prepare men to accept either the idea of a material heaven on earth in an imminent millennium, or the idea that heaven and hell were internal states of mind (p. 174)’. Although Muggleton’s doctrine was as extreme as the radical sects got, it goes some way to showing by what degree the little narratives had replaced the grand narrative during the 1650s.

to the likes of Parker and Fowler in their condemnation of Dissenters as nothing less than mad enthusiasts.<sup>48</sup>

Bunyan's inability to communicate belief in absolute soteriological confirmation could have certainly had some basis in this unwillingness to be associated with a diagnosed *psychological* malady. I will consider Bunyan's apparent lack of unquestionable grace at length in chapter one. This argument diverges from received assumptions about the spiritual message of *Grace Abounding* and spiritual autobiography as a genre in that I posit that for Bunyan – like Clarkson, Norwood, and Beaumont – the 'conversion' narrative provides no such evidence of grace and, conversely, is a document of doubt and of inner conflict that is never really resolved.

By employing postmodern critical theory to a study of *Grace Abounding* and other examples of spiritual autobiography, this thesis also diverges from the majority of theoretical perspectives applied to studies of seventeenth-century nonconformist writing. Apart from some notable Marxist and feminist readings<sup>49</sup>, Bunyan has yet to attract the kind of contemporary critical attention seen in recent studies of Milton for example<sup>50</sup>, and even what is perhaps the most striking postmodern reading of Bunyan's output – Stuart Sim and David Walker's *Bunyan and Authority* – makes a point of excluding *Grace Abounding* due to it being 'a personal memoir recording the progress of the author's own little narrative to a state of maturity'<sup>51</sup>. My own study questions this conclusion and argues that Bunyan is in as much

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Davies, *Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2002, p.91.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*, and Tamsin Spargo, 'Contra-Dictions: Women as Figures of Exclusion and Resistance in John Bunyan and Agnes Beaumont's Narratives', in *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen, Suzanne Trill (Keele: Keele University Press) 1996.

<sup>50</sup> See in particular the resurgent writing on religious violence in *Samson Agonistes* in relation to 9/11; in, for example, Tobias Gregory, 'The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*', *Studies in English Literature*, Vol. 50: 1, Winter 2010; John Carey 'A Work in Praise of Terrorism? September 11 & *Samson Agonistes*', *TLS* (6<sup>th</sup> September 2002) pp. 15-16; Stanley Fish, "'There is Nothing He Cannot Ask": Milton, Liberalism, & Terrorism', in *Milton and the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism*, ed. Michael Lieb and Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press) 2006, pp. 243-64.

<sup>51</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 18.

a state of Differend at the conclusion of the spiritual autobiography as he is at its commencement. Nigel Smith's succinct summation of the mood of nonconformity in the aftermath of the English Revolution illustrates how a reading informed, like the present one, by postmodern theory is viable,

The disputes between religious radicals caused continued fragmentation and dissension: battles for authority within churches or sects were paralleled by individual claims for sole prophetic authority. At the same time the dominance of Puritan opinion in the Interregnum governments meant that some religious radicals influenced national rule, while others felt sufficiently involved in the plight of the nation to criticize and to remonstrate with governments, largely within the terms defined by their own religion.<sup>52</sup>

This passage hints at, inadvertently perhaps, at the kind of 'postmodern' ideology I see reflected in the works interrogated here.

### **Classic Spiritual Autobiography**

By classic spiritual autobiography I mean a conversion narrative that addresses – and successfully meets – the criteria of predestinarian doctrine as followed by a number of seventeenth-century nonconformist sects, chiefly the Baptists. The assumption that such a body of writing existed forms the hegemonic model (the grand narrative) against which I will consider the dissent apparent in the four autobiographies read in this study. The following summation will illustrate further the kind of narrative to which I'm alluding:

This genre is rightly described as highly conventional and predictable, and two aspects of its influence are stressed: a new value that was placed on the inner lives of ordinary people, and a uniform structure of "stages" of conversion and sanctification that furnished a narrative pattern.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*, p. 342.

<sup>53</sup> Leopold Damrosch Jr., *God's Plot & Man's Stories: Studies in the Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press) 1985, p. 34.

Whether or not that statement is a fair appraisal of classic spiritual autobiography forms part of the thesis at the heart of my study – indeed, the author challenges some of the implications himself – and yet for writers of these texts, predictable, uniform structure was what they strove to achieve and would indeed have gone some way to confirming their elect status. An indication of the importance of the assumed structural familiarity in the circulated spiritual autobiographies can be found in the long titles of some of these texts. They are certainly suggestive of predictability with regard to content and go some way toward illustrating the expectations placed upon conversion narratives by the nonconformist sectarian audience. Laurence Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found*, perhaps the most contentious spiritual autobiography of all, stresses nevertheless the intended message to be conveyed:

The Lost sheep Found: or The Prodigal returned to his Fathers house, after many a sad and weary Journey through many Religious Countreys, Where now, notwithstanding all his former Transgressions, and breach of his Fathers Commands, he is received in an eternal Favor, and all the righteous and wicked Sons that he hath left behinde, reserved for eternal misery; As all along every Church or Dispensation may read in his Travels, their Portion after this Life.  
Written by Laur. Claxon, the onely true converted Messenger of Christ Jesus, Creator of Heaven and Earth.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, on the title page of her *Satan his Methods and Malice Baffled*, Hannah Allen describes her narrative as 'reciting the great advantages the Devil made of her deep melancholy, and the triumphant victories, rich and sovereign graces, God gave her over all his stratagems and devices'<sup>55</sup>. Both examples stress the predestinarian pattern of evidence of election snatched from the threat of reprobation.

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<sup>54</sup> Frontispiece, Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found* (The Rota at the University of Exeter) 1974.

<sup>55</sup> Hannah Allen, *Satan his Methods and Malice Baffled*, in Elspeth Graham et al (eds.), *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (London and New York: Routledge) 1994, p. 197.

As the only spiritual autobiography to have sustained anything approaching a critical tradition, John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* is, almost by default, the standard by which all other nonconformist conversion narratives are judged; although as Roger Sharrock stated, quite rightly, in his introduction to an edition of Bunyan's text, 'There are significant departures from the autobiographical norm'<sup>56</sup>, *Grace Abounding* – ostensibly at least – remains the epitome of classic spiritual autobiography. In even the most penetrating studies, the received critical appraisal of Bunyan's text judges it to be successful in its depiction of the author's soteriological happy ending. Having on the one hand posited that Bunyan's, 'sense of confirmed damnation is in his youth as unsettled as his sense of salvation will be later in the text'<sup>57</sup>, Vera J. Camden concludes an article about Bunyan's compulsion to blaspheme by stating explicitly that he experiences an 'absolute identification with and incorporation of Holy Writ'<sup>58</sup>. Allusion to sustained spiritual uncertainty here is superseded by the authority of assumed authorial salvation.

By the 1640s spiritual autobiographies tended to adhere to a conventionalised stylistic format. The record of an individual's soteriological growth, or at least the search for evidence of this, had become a recognisable genre with a number of assumptions and expectations regarding content and outcome. As D. Bruce Hindmarsh notes, this phenomenon reflected the direction of seventeenth-century Calvinist doctrine: 'The seventeenth century witnessed a significant anthropocentric turn as theology increasingly concerned itself with the sequencing of salvation and mapped this understanding onto experience as an order of conversion'<sup>59</sup>. For some, the idea of mapping spiritual progression became an endeavour in itself and led to the creation of diagrams that charted the two

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<sup>56</sup> Roger Sharrock, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1962, p. xxxi.

<sup>57</sup> Vera J. Camden, 'Blasphemy and the Problem of Self in *Grace Abounding*', *Bunyan Studies* 1:2 (Spring 1989) p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p.19.

<sup>59</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2005, p. 15.

opposing routes of double predestination: that of election on the one hand, and damnation on the other. These maps provide a literal illustration of the path the individual's spiritual life should be expected to follow and, as a result dictate the compositional format of any given Nonconformist conversion narrative.

Of the charts produced by followers of Calvinist doctrine, the two most important for the present study are those devised by William Perkins and John Bunyan. Perkins' 'A Survey, or Table declaring the order of the causes of Salvation and Damnation' appeared in his *A Golden Chaine* – the text of which consists of explanatory gloss – in 1591. The Table itself is a rather convoluted flow diagram showing the work of God and then the life of Christ in a central column with the decrees of Election to the left, and Reprobation to the right. The most astonishing quality displayed in Perkins' chart is the absolutism of reprobation. Here the soul of humanity is a differend, the opposing states of salvation and damnation being in irreconcilable conflict with no possibility of being resolved. For the individual concerned no 'rule of judgement', to quote Lyotard, can be realistically applied. The state of reprobation – the eventual fate of the vast majority of the population – is defined clearly as being an authority that is both inescapable and completely at odds with the doubt and uncertainty of predestinarian doctrine. For the Nonconformist, existence lay between absolutism and uncertainty; the general crisis of legitimation in spirituality this caused – itself a struggle between the unattainable grand narratives of election and reprobation and the little narratives of self-scrutiny and soul-searching – is understandable to say the least.

John Bunyan's *A Mappe Shewing the Order & Causes of Salvation & Damnation* was published in 1663 and bears many similarities with Perkins' Survey. That Bunyan's *Mappe* was continuing a Puritan tradition is borne out by Greaves' assertion that '[Bunyan] definitely consulted Perkin's *A Golden Chaine*'<sup>60</sup> while in jail. Although there are some

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<sup>60</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 605.

notable differences – Bunyan’s chart is far more verbose than Perkins’ and gives Biblical footnotes to illustrate its intent – the overwhelming sense is that in the intervening years between both texts, the essential sequential structure of successful salvation had remained constant. As P. J. H. Titlestad concludes, ‘The diagrams, the maps, show that the seventeenth-century Calvinist had detailed spiritual and psychological patterns (routes perhaps) to follow’<sup>61</sup> and this tradition was to be consolidated in the spiritual autobiographies produced by Nonconformist adherents to predestinarian doctrine.

An undeniably essential element of the Christian beliefs of the nonconformist sects and the basis for the impetus to write a spiritual autobiography, predestination was not, as I have said, necessarily a central doctrine of Calvin’s theology. Although discussed at length in the *Institutes*, Calvin himself did not regard it as being the foundation of his teaching; as François Wendel notes,

[To] recognise that Calvin taught double predestination, and underlined its dogmatic and practical interest, is not to say that this must be taken to be the very centre of his teaching. His earliest writings do not contain any systematic statement of the problem, and although, later on and under the influence of St Augustine and of Bucer, he accorded a growing importance to it, he did so under the sway of ecclesiological and pastoral preoccupations rather than in order to make it a main foundation of his theology.<sup>62</sup>

Despite Calvin’s own thoughts on the doctrine, seventeenth-century Protestantism embraced predestination fully and with it a general internalisation of spirituality. Christopher Hill notes that Protestants had ‘emancipated themselves from priests, but not from the terrors of sin, from the priest internalized in their own consciences’<sup>63</sup>. This independence from clergy and an emphasis on the self resulted in such inward-looking autobiographical texts as Sara Davy’s *Heaven Realized* in which Davy adopts the structural expectations of double predestination to confess a number of highly emotive events not least her anger towards her

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<sup>61</sup> P. J. H. Titlestad, ‘From Beza to Bunyan: The Pilgrim Road Mapped?’, *Bunyan Studies* 13, 2008/2009, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> François Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 264.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 154-155.



mother, feelings of guilt over the death of her baby brother, and her homosexuality. The most striking quality of her writing is its subjective handling of faith on a very personal level; in this insistence, displaying signs of grace despite her fallible humanity:

Thus did I find much comfort and sweetness in my secret communion with the Lord, and found much ease in my troubles, which I took as gracious returns of my poor broken prayers, and was much carried out to trust in him and to wait upon him. Then could I sit and call to remembrance the mercies of old as a tender and a loving Father who nourished up my poor soul, which made me exceedingly admire the infinite riches of his grace.<sup>64</sup>

By structuring her autobiography in the form of a conversion narrative, Davy presents a startlingly honest self-portrait – although it should be said that, like many spiritual autobiographies, the content of *Heaven Realized* was compiled not by Davy herself, but by her Baptist minister – not as the lurid memorandum of the reprobate, but rather as an example to other sectaries of how signs of election override external secular crises. The recognizable structure of the genre is of comfort both to the individual – whose signs of election are dependent upon shoe-horning subjective experience into the predestinarian model – and to the congregation to whom these narratives were often communicated.

The importance of the spiritual autobiography as a pastoral device goes some way towards explaining the predisposition of its exponents to adhere to a conventionalized structure. Although something I will discuss at greater length in chapter two, it's worth noting briefly the role these narratives played in providing emotional and spiritual support for members of the nonconformist sectarian community. By taking advantage of the breakdown in governmental control of the press in the wake of the Civil War, any dissenting individual could theoretically see their text in print and be given a wide distribution. The relatively new and inexpensive methods of printing coupled with an audience desperate to get their hands on

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<sup>64</sup> Sara Davy, from *Heaven Realized* in Elspeth Graham et al (eds.) *Her Own Life*, p. 173.

the material led to the circulation of texts that up to the 1640s might only have been communicable in oral form. As Paul Delany says,

[T]hese sects engaged in vigorous propagandizing and seized on cheap printing as an effective means of spreading their beliefs. Autobiography had a direct and truthful quality which could be relied on to make a strong appeal to the unconverted.<sup>65</sup>

Available in print and presented orally at sectarian meetings – indeed, composition of a spiritual autobiography was often a condition of membership – conversion narratives were an intrinsic part of the nonconformist community. The expectations heaped upon them both by ministers and the congregation as a whole probably reinforced the conservative, conventionalized, structure and would surely have dissuaded anyone seeking confirmation of grace (and inclusion within a group of like-minded dissenters) from dissenting from the rigid stylistic model.

### **The Psychosis of Soteriology**

The Calvinist doctrine of double predestination looms large over the spiritual autobiographies written by the members of the Puritan sects. The search for tangible signs of election became an obsession for all prospective saints and led many of them into real psychological turmoil. This often manifested itself as a subjective crisis of legitimation, a differend initiated by the conflict between the authority of the bible and of the rigid expectation of what signs a member of the elect should display, and the individual's struggle to incorporate these hegemonies into their own experiences. In a study of Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Roger Pooley alluded to this crisis when he writes that, 'On the one hand [Bunyan] has a very traditional view of the authority of the biblical text; yet the difficulties of interpreting it, let alone obeying it, result in agonies of indecision and insecurity'<sup>66</sup>. It is only by overcoming

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul) 1969, p. 81.

<sup>66</sup> Roger Pooley, 'Grace Abounding and the New Sense of Self' in Anne Laurence et al (ed) *John Bunyan and his England 1628-88* (London: The Hambledon Press) 1990, p. 106.

the kind of dichotomy illustrated here that confirmation of elect status can be gained. The method by which an individual attempts to address this lack of legitimation forms the stylistic interest of the Puritan spiritual autobiography and is in some ways more useful in gauging the success of aspirant members of the elect than the – more often than not generic – records of the cumulative conversion experience.

The intense self-scrutiny necessitated by adherence to predestinarian doctrine meant that spiritual autobiographies were introspective, highly personal forms of prose writing and were, as Stachniewski posits, ‘virtually the first inward-looking autobiographies’<sup>67</sup>. These highly subjective texts, informed by a belief system that diminished any notion of the self in favour of the absolute sovereignty of God, examined in minutiae the extreme physical and psychological effects such intense spiritual engagement had on individual Puritan dissenters. More than being mere checklists slavishly cataloguing spiritual progression, the spiritual autobiography could provide the most honest, certainly the most personal, records of contemporary religious and secular concerns. Agnes Beaumont’s *Narrative*, for example, provides perhaps the most compelling evidence of salvation among the group of texts under consideration here and yet also gives extraordinary insight into the often overlooked experiences of unmarried women in Seventeenth-Century England. Her prose creates a vivid account of her place in the world: her responsibilities, hopes, and fears are steeped in her writing as evidenced by the famous (and scandalous) episode involving John Bunyan:

At last unexpected came Mr. Bunyan, and called at my brother’s as he went to the meeting; but the sight of him caused sorrow, and joy, in me; I was glad to see him but I was afraid he would not carry me to the meeting behind him; and how to ask him I did not know, for fear he should deny me. So I got my brother to ask him.<sup>68</sup>

This passage, even taken in isolation, displays Beaumont’s wavering optimism – Bunyan’s arrival causes sorrow *before* joy as if to underline the inherent negativity of the Puritan

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<sup>67</sup> John Stachniewski (ed.), *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xiii.

<sup>68</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 43.

mentality – her deference to her pastor and her brother, and also her courage in seeking a solution to attain her desires. By writing about particular localised events with honesty and candour, Beaumont, perhaps inadvertently says as much about the role of class, gender, and society as a whole as she does about her soteriological progression.

The psychological state of most writers of spiritual autobiographies was, then, understandably delicate. Adherence to predestinarian doctrine coupled with the act of intense autobiography saw even otherwise strong individuals succumb to sustained periods of depression. These subjective crises could also be symptomatic – they would certainly have been informed by it – of a wider mood of negativity among the sects after the period of relative religious freedom of the preceding decades. Christopher Hill talks about ‘the common man and woman struggling for self-expression against the dead weight of the culture of centuries’<sup>69</sup> and it is undeniable that the failure of the Revolution dealt a crushing blow – both mental and physical – to the idealism of the sects. Both Richard L. Greaves and Vera J. Camden have written recently about John Bunyan’s psychological illness<sup>70</sup> and A. L. Morton, in his study of the Ranters, finds it, ‘impossible not to find in them all the signs of a revolution in retreat, an abandonment of the rational hope... a realisation that they were calling upon their last resources when everything else had failed’<sup>71</sup>.

Writing from the position of extreme Puritanism is overflowing with vivid descriptions of despair – much of it unrelenting in intensity. Even in 1649, Abiezer Coppe was describing the kind of apocalyptic scenario Bunyan would later conceive in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*:

First, all my strength, my forces were utterly routed, my house I dwelt in fired; my father and mother forsook me, the wife of my bosom loathed me, mine old name was rotted, perished; and I was utterly plagued, consumed, damned, rammed, and sunke

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<sup>69</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 374.

<sup>70</sup> See Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, and Vera J. Camden, ‘Young Man Bunyan’.

<sup>71</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 18.

into nothing, into the bowels of the still Eternity (my mothers wombe) out of it which I came naked, and whetherto I returned again naked.<sup>72</sup>

Notice the personalised nature of the image. The repetition of ‘my’ is striking as is the brutal imagery. This is destruction at the most individual level and it reflects the solitary nature of the despair suffered by dissenting Puritans. Sara Davy, in her *Heaven Realized* that dates from 1670, provides a similarly personal expression of despair that is, if anything, more affecting for its rather more mundane context:

My soul longed for such a heavenly communion, which put me much at the throne of grace to desire one glimpse of his glory, one testimony of his love in Christ; but Satan’s suggestion put me to a loss in my comfort. He would often persuade me I was a *hypocrite*, and that I was fallen from grace. This was a sad and great burden upon my spirit, and I thought my sins was so great I must cry out with Cain, “My punishment should be greater that I can bear”.<sup>73</sup>

In this instance, Davy is adhering to conventional conversion narrative practice – being tempted into reprobation after receiving hints of God’s grace – but the implications are the same: the life of the nonconformist predestinarian is defined by depression; fleeting moments of hope, yes, as when Coppe describes

a great body of light, like the light of the Sun, and red as fire, in the forme of a drum (as it were) whereupon with exheeding trembling and amazement on the flesh, and with joy unspeakable in the spirit, I clapt my hands, and cried out, *Amen, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen.*<sup>74</sup>

But the psychological situation for the dissenting individual is, for the most part, a self-defeating, spiralling differend of despair.

It is against this cultural and psychological context that the spiritual autobiographies under consideration here were written. Indeed, the vast majority of Puritan conversion narratives appear either during the Civil Wars or after the Restoration, with most of those that *were* published during the 1650s coming from the Quakers suggesting that potential saints

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<sup>72</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, in Andrew Hopton (ed.) *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings* (London: Aporia Press) 1987, pp. 16-17.

<sup>73</sup> Sara Davy, *From Heaven Realized*, in Elspeth Graham et al (eds.) *Her Own Life*, p. 171.

<sup>74</sup> *A Fiery Flying Roll*, p.17.

might have been as motivated to compose spiritual autobiographies by political crises as much as by spiritual ones.<sup>75</sup> Motivation aside, however, one element shared by Bunyan, Norwood, Clarkson, and Beaumont is a tendency to sink into sustained periods of despair during which a perceived lack of legitimation in the self and in society overshadows the search for signs of election. Although this is a common critical theme for studies of spiritual autobiography, it also has implications for the current postmodern approach.

Roger Sharrock defines the basis of the psychological differend found in these conversion narratives with his observation that ‘The life of the Christian on earth was seen as in constant movement; progress or deterioration was always taking place.’<sup>76</sup> He is writing about the seventeenth-century Puritan experience but the sentiment is pertinent also to the study of any of the spiritual autobiographies from the period. The notion of constant fluctuation between progress and deterioration reflects the psychological state of the nonconformist Puritan sectarian, the assumed form of such an individual’s conversion narrative, and also suggests a cultural differend. Consumed by the search for evidence of religious truth, is it any wonder that Bunyan and his contemporaries succumbed to all manner of psychological conflict given the institutionalised crises of spiritual authority arrayed against them? So acute is the lack of belief in the self that even when confronted by an example of unquestioning faith – for instance the episode with the poor women in *Grace Abounding* – the sectarian response is to see such affirmation of grace as being utterly unattainable. As Bunyan writes:

At this I felt my own heart began to shake, as mistrusting my condition to be naught; for I saw that in all my thoughts about Religion and Salvation, the New birth did never enter into my mind, neither knew I the comfort of the Word and Promise, nor the deceitfulness and treachery of my own wicked heart.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> This conjecture is based primarily on the list ‘*Puritan Spiritual Autobiographies written before 1725*’ in Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul) 1972, pp. 241-259.

<sup>76</sup> Roger Sharrock (ed.), *Grace Abounding*, p. xxvii.

<sup>77</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, p. 15.

Notice here Bunyan's admission of 'mistrusting my condition'. Even when faced with divinity in a pure – and surely fully comprehensible – form in those somewhat below Bunyan's 'middling sort', the result is an abject deterioration in spirituality. It is as if salvation – even the *possibility* of salvation – is somehow at odds with the life of the individual. The differend exists within the cultural make-up of dissenting nonconformism and its intrinsic existence leads its followers into acute crises of legitimation. This depressive, seemingly irreconcilable, condition is seen also in Richard Norwood's *Confessions* when Norwood – in a passage that shares much with the one from Sara Davy quoted above – muses on the limitations of his spirituality:

There is no doubt an excellency and beauty in heavenly things, but I cannot see it, it is such a beauty as is not suteable to my nature or to myne ey or myne ey not suteable to that, I have no delight in it.<sup>78</sup>

This psychological turmoil is, in received critical studies<sup>79</sup> of spiritual autobiography and in the contemporary cultural milieu of the sects, a fully expected part of the conversion process and even goes some way to proving one's elect status. John Brown, in his rather partisan biography of Bunyan says of what he calls these 'intense spiritual experiences' that 'It was an awful time, yet it had its compensations. It gave [Bunyan] that mighty hold of men's hearts which more than most writers and preachers he has always had'<sup>80</sup>. Even in more recent, and more considered, studies, the psychological malady communicated through spiritual autobiographies is seen as part of the general pattern of the form, what Roger Sharrock has labelled, after the 'mappes' drawn up by William Perkins and Bunyan himself, 'resistance to

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 141.

<sup>79</sup> It is worth mentioning here the discomfort Nicholas McDowell has expressed with regard to 'the polemical stereotypes which revisionist historians have argued contaminate the evidence for the nature of radicalism in this period'. *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 2003, p. 90. The controversy surrounding historicized readings of the Ranters in particular will be alluded to in Chapter 3 below. My own reading 'backdates' postmodernism in order to identify a mood analogous to it the late Seventeenth-Century England.

<sup>80</sup> John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life, Times, and Work* (Hamden: Archon Books) 1969, p. 56.

the Gospel'<sup>81</sup>. This position, however, assumes the success of the conversion process for those engaged upon the composition of a spiritual autobiography. It does not take into account the restless and ultimately unfulfilled search for truth that we find in Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found*, nor the possibility that prospective saints like Beaumont or Bunyan are not convinced of their salvation and that their respective spiritual autobiographies provide no real soteriological closure: that the depressive state is a perpetual one, one that is independent of an authoritative conversion experience.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to identify the various modes of dissent found in the spiritual autobiographies of four individuals writing during the mid-seventeenth century in England. This in turn will show how effective spiritual autobiography could be in providing a literary device with which these men and women could explore the subjective nonconformity with regard to their religion, politics, gender, class, and psychology. The theoretical position against which I read these texts will illustrate the mood of postmodernism both in the nonconformist psyche and the wider community as well as in the literary genre itself. The predisposed grand narrative of evidence of salvation – the position of authority gained from the knowledge of being either among the elect or else being reprobate – will be seen to be an untenable position for dissenting nonconformists to adopt. The little narratives of internal doubt, hope, and uncertainty create a culture of scepticism, of competing phrase regimens, in which a hegemonic concept like grace is unable to endure in the manner prospective saints like John Bunyan might have hoped.

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<sup>81</sup> Roger Sharrock (ed.), *Grace Abounding*, p. xxix.



# Chapter One

## **‘I was in diverse frames of spirit’: Legitimacy, Conflict, and *Grace Abounding***

This chapter shows the lack of conviction Bunyan has in his soteriological growth – in his grand narrative, to use Jean-Francois Lyotard’s phraseology<sup>82</sup> – and how, as a result of the internal doubt at the heart of his spirituality, he is unable to come to a lasting sense of grace and is resigned instead to adopting a position of distrust, dissenting from his own authoritative Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

John Stachniewski, in his introduction to *Grace Abounding*, refers to a ‘shared cultural experience’ when situating Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography within the nonconformist sectarian tradition. Bunyan is often seen<sup>83</sup> as upholding the model of the Puritan conversion narrative and a great deal of critical work assumes this position. For Stachniewski, the reading and writing of conversion narratives was a communal occupation that certainly held pastoral qualities, but was not autodidactic or self-aggrandising. It is easy to see the act of autobiography – especially a *spiritual* autobiography with its prescribed motivational drive – as being egotistical, a means of writing oneself into success or in this case, election. *Grace Abounding*, however, is a work very much of its environment and its cultural background – the ‘shared experience’ to which Stachniewski alludes – is as much the protagonist of the text as Bunyan is. The weaknesses and flaws of character that Bunyan

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<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of how Lyotard’s theory equates with Bunyan and spiritual autobiographies, see the Introduction.

<sup>83</sup> For many critics, *Grace Abounding* is the most successful of the Puritan spiritual autobiographies and as a result is a rather single-minded text following a highly-structured conventional pattern. In this instance, see Roger Sharrock’s ‘Introduction’ to *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1962, and Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1988. For psychological and psychoanalytical readings, see Richard I. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, and Vera J. Camden, ‘Young Man Bunyan’.

himself highlights are more than background material to his assumed salvation; they underline the conflict at the heart of the text and describe a man whose fluctuating psychological state represents a much wider mood of discontent in the sectarian character.

For William York Tindall, the compulsion to write an account of one's salvation owed more than a little to the promotion of nonconformist doctrine and he clearly sees *Grace Abounding* as being a model of evangelical marketing:

the desire to convert or to guide others enriched advertisement with propaganda for rebirth and gospel holiness. The enthusiasts, who were also evangelists, provided their own example for the imitation of young sinners and directed them through the orthodox agitations of conversion.<sup>84</sup>

Bunyan's preface to *Grace Abounding* is addressed to his children and, since Bunyan was writing from prison, it is a rather moving communication that reads as a private letter from a father rather than a preacher. He introduces the text as being 'a Relation of the work of God upon my own soul, even from the very first, till now; wherein you may perceive my castings down, and raisings up; for he woundeth, and his hands make whole'<sup>85</sup> which would appear to continue a sense of familial, private reflection. That assumption would be a particularly naive one when we consider the fiery, puritanical statements made on the title page where the publisher declares that the 'Brief and Faithful Relation' is 'published for the support of the weak and tempted people of God'. For the aspiring preacher, what better way to inspire a prospective congregation?

Tindall adheres to the common belief that Bunyan's attempts at finding confirmation of salvation are successful. His study of *Grace Abounding* – and of spiritual autobiographies written before and after Bunyan – makes no reference to the mood of doubt that I would

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<sup>84</sup> William York Tindall, *John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher* (New York: Russell & Russell) 1964, p. 25.

<sup>85</sup> *Grace Abounding*, pp. 1-2.

argue prevents Bunyan from achieving his absolute goal of election. This perspective ignores the startlingly pessimistic nature of Bunyan's writing and the deep depression to which he continually succumbs. Tindall places Bunyan in a tradition of dissenting spiritual writing, stressing both his adherence to the stylistic model of conventional spiritual autobiography and to his artistic achievement:

The genius of John Bunyan, equally informed by his experience and by the autobiographical tradition, inspired a conventional work, which is, however, not only representative but excellent in its kind. *Grace Abounding* is indebted for its arrangement and selection of material to the works of Bunyan's predecessors, and for its substance to the common experience of rebirth and call; but though it deviates in no important particular from the autobiographies of other preachers, it is superior to most in the literary adornment and dramatic presentation of customary details.<sup>86</sup>

Bunyan's literary success in recording daily events among England's 'meanest sort' is undeniable although it has to be said that Bunyan's single-mindedness with regard to his spiritual message is often at the expense of what we might consider to be essential autobiographical material – details of his family life are sketchy, for instance – and we must turn to lesser-known writers like Agnes Beaumont for a more exacting record of the minutiae of lower class life (see chapter two for a full reading of Beaumont and her spiritual autobiography). Bunyan's characterisation – something he was to develop further in the great allegorical fictions that were to follow – is entirely believable and his record of speech is particularly noteworthy. As Tindall concludes, '(Bunyan's) poetical imagination represented the ordinary circumstances of his conversion with dramatic intelligence and perhaps with some improvements'<sup>87</sup>.

Bunyan's literary achievement lies in the honest record of his spiritual doubt. The lack of faith Bunyan displays, despite much in the way of evidence of his election, results in

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>87</sup> William York Tindall, *John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher*, p. 32.

what must be the most honest of autobiographical sketches, certainly one of the most believable. Bunyan's readers have invariably approached his writing from either their own religious position or else with an assumption that Bunyan represents a positive evangelical message. The opposite, it must be said, is true; like Defoe's anti-heroes, Bunyan in *Grace Abounding* is struggling with the little narratives of his internal spirituality. Without the authority of election, Bunyan is forced into a position of doubt – something he freely admits at the conclusion of the narrative – which is self-perpetuating and as far from real salvation as he can be.

Christopher Hill stresses the difficulties of attaining salvation whilst being part of a secular reality when he posits that:

Bunyan's Christian got rid of his burden only after he had turned away from the world and its works through the strait gate, and had accepted the cross. Then the burden rolled off his back, no thanks to any effort of his. If natural man could cast off the burden by his own exertions, he would cast off God too.<sup>88</sup>

This is undeniable and yet for all intents and purposes, Bunyan, by the time he becomes a preacher, has accepted the cross and yet only periodically does the burden fall from his back. Bunyan can afford himself the luxury of absolutism in his allegorical writing simply because of the fictional nature of those texts – although as I will go on to show, the spiritual doubt he experiences in *Grace Abounding* has parallels in its allegorical successor, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is only when faced with the honesty of his autobiography that we understand just how uncertain of his spiritual future he appears to be. This chapter will consider this sense of doubt and the general lack of authority apparent in Bunyan's spiritual autobiography and show how *Grace Abounding* dissents from its stated intent – to show 'the manner of

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<sup>88</sup>Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 408.

[Bunyan's] conversion' – and instead accepts the incommensurable discourse, the differend, that exists between the desire for election and the reality of spiritual doubt.

### **The Postmodern Context of *Grace Abounding***

When Christopher Hill writes that with *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan 'aimed not to convert but to convince the elect that they were indeed saved, whatever the doubts and temptations'<sup>89</sup>, he inadvertently identifies the lack of conviction at the heart of the text. As the title page of the first edition clearly indicates, Bunyan's reason for publishing was 'for the support of the weak and tempted People of God', and yet the support he offers is conversational rather than didactic; as an exercise in pastoral writing, Bunyan's spiritual autobiography succeeds in generating a mood of empathy with his 'weak' congregation but does not convince as a record of the true path to salvation.

Bunyan's life frames perhaps the most eventful period of domestic English history. He was born in 1628, a year before the beginning of the Personal Rule of Charles I; his death, on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1688, came between James II's escape to France, and the landing of William of Orange at Torbay. In the space of little more than half a century, Bunyan saw two Civil Wars, the reign of three monarchs, the regicide of one, as well as sustained periods of both tolerance for and persecution of his chosen method of worship. Added to this already fractured political context, Bunyan's own personal family history is tantalisingly punctuated by conflict and emotional crisis. His ancestry is generally judged to have been of the 'middling sort'. His family appear to have been a colourfully-drawn cast of characters whose description mirrors that of the protagonists found in his fictional writing. As Christopher Hill has written,

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<sup>89</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 66.

Thomas Bunyan, John's great-great-grandfather, was described as a 'victualler, common brewer of beer' in 1542; he and his wife were many times fined for infringing the assizes of beer and bread... John's grandfather... described himself as a 'brazier' and 'petty chapman'. He was in trouble with the ecclesiastical officials in 1617 for calling the churchwardens liars.<sup>90</sup>

The impression inferred from this portrait is one of discontent and the numerous petty crimes resulting from it suggests that the Bunyan family were in a state of conflict with authority in general, that they had developed an existence that constituted a number of little narratives that continually rankled with the grand narrative of the Church or the secular law. Richard L. Greaves glosses this view of Bunyan's immediate ancestry and its effect on the later generation when he writes that John Bunyan's grandfather (Thomas) 'may have bequeathed more than material possessions, for his grandson imbibed the anticlerical spirit, castigating "filthy blind priests" in 1658'<sup>91</sup>. The external reality of the society and culture from which Bunyan emerged then, was as Stuart Sim posits, 'situated at a critical point in the transition from the modern to the postmodern'<sup>92</sup> and had an enormous impact upon the content of *Grace Abounding*.

Imprisoned for twelve years in the immediate aftermath of the Restoration<sup>93</sup>, Bunyan's spiritual autobiography was written from his jail cell; as Richard L. Greaves writes rather poetically, 'The state could still his voice but not suppress his pen.'<sup>94</sup> Roger Sharrock posits that *Grace Abounding* 'reflects not merely the enforced leisure which enabled Bunyan to write an autobiography, but the turning in of the mind upon itself which obliged him to

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<sup>90</sup> *ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>91</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> Stuart Sim, 'Bunyan, Lyotard, and the Conflict of Narratives (or, Postmodernising Bunyan)' *Bunyan Studies*, 8: 1998, p. 68.

<sup>93</sup> He was, Hill writes, 'charged under the 1593 act for holding "unlawful meetings and conventicles", "calling together the people". But both he and his accusers knew that he was being penalized for his *preaching*.' *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>94</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 146.

experience over again the emotions of his conversion'<sup>95</sup>. Bunyan's twelve year imprisonment bore several of his most spiritually-charged early writings<sup>96</sup> and was clearly a fertile environment in which to explore his politics and his religion. The publication of such an intensely private work of autobiography poses a number of questions regarding the motivation behind the composition of *Grace Abounding*. If the purpose of the conversion narrative was to record evidence of election then the publication of such a work would then serve only as an example to like-minded Puritans, as the title page asserts. Rather like the culture of pamphleteering that thrived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, published spiritual autobiographies were written for a particular audience, one that cultivated expectations with regard to the content of what they read. Bearing this in mind, then, N. H. Keeble's remarks about the publication of *Grace Abounding* take on a greater significance:

If writing *Grace Abounding* was a consolation to Bunyan himself, its publication was a relief to the frustration of his silencing. He might take comfort not only from recording his spiritual experience... but also from the opportunity this provided to serve, express his concern for and talk to those he loved.<sup>97</sup>

Bunyan's role as pastor of the congregation at Bedford meant that he regularly ministered to the elect since evidence of a state of grace was a condition of membership. Hill goes on to write that these "'Visible saints" were those who had an appearance of grace, who were of suitable conversation, and had satisfied the church as to the soundness of doctrine by a confession of faith and repentance of their sins'<sup>98</sup>. Such criteria seem subjective at best and cast further doubt upon the validity of soteriological claims made by followers of experimental Calvinist doctrine. This general lack of conviction would seem to echo the

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<sup>95</sup> Roger Sharrock, 'Introduction' to *Grace Abounding*, p. xxvi.

<sup>96</sup> Between 1660 and 1666, Bunyan wrote and published, for instance: *Grace Abounding*, *Of the Resurrection of the Dead*, *The Holy City*, *Profitable Meditations*, *Prison Meditations*, *One Thing is Needful*, and *Ebal and Gerizzim*. We can assume that he also began work on *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

<sup>97</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.

psychological turmoil found in *Grace Abounding* and the mood of anxiety that drives Bunyan to make such desperate declamations: ‘How can you tell you are Elected? and what if you should not? how then?’<sup>99</sup> Of course, this self-scrutiny is also a means of accusatory questioning directed at his audience as much as at himself.

The congregation played an important part in convincing the ‘elect’ of their salvation, probably more so than the intense introspection that formed the other part. In a fascinating study, Beth Lynch describes the severe methods with which pastors enforced doctrine; it suggests a certain over-compensation on the part of the true elect:

As a precondition of acceptance into the church, prospective and lapsed members were obliged to “give evidence of the truth” of their conversion or repentance “to the Church’s satisfaction”: individual witness was not enough. Indeed, these membership conditions were potentially authoritarian in the most literal sense: on one occasion recorded in the *Church Book*, Bunyan and one Brother Cooper were appointed to “admonish” a lapsed member, and to “endeavour his conviction for his sin *in* withdrawing from the Church assemblies” (p. 40, emphasis added). This entry indicates a subtle yet significant shift from pastoral concern with an individual’s spiritual conviction as a sinner to active judgement for his sinful resistance to the authority of his congregation.<sup>100</sup>

This would seem to be at odds with Richard L. Greaves who stresses the careful pastoral work performed by the nonconformist clergy:

Dissenting clerics recognised that their followers were likely to struggle with temptation and guilt; indeed some conflict was a sign of Christian vitality, and believers were repeatedly urged to beware of evil creeping into their lives. The problem was to do this without pushing sensitive disciples into neuroses.<sup>101</sup>

Obviously, many ministers failed in this last area.

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<sup>99</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 21.

<sup>100</sup> Beth Lynch, *John Bunyan and the Language of Conviction* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer) 2004, p. 14. Lynch is quoting from the Bedford *Church Book*.

<sup>101</sup> Richard L. Greaves, ‘To Be Found Faithful’: The Non-conformist Tradition in England, 1660-1700’, *Bunyan Studies*, 4: Spring 1991, p. 51.



Despite the apparent distrust or scepticism levelled at members of nonconformist congregations by their pastors, Bunyan himself appears, by the end of *Grace Abounding*, confident of his salvation. 'Now was my heart full of comfort', he declares and yet, in his conclusion he adds an addendum that would appear to counter this conviction and like so many other writers of spiritual autobiographies, ends his narrative with a qualified denouement. He admits to experiencing what he refers to as 'seven abominations in my heart' and writes with frankness about his continued lack of spiritual fulfilment:

I find to this day seven abominations in my heart: 1. Inclinations to unbelief, 2. Suddenlie to forget the love and mercie that Christ manifesteth, 3. A leaning to the Works of the Law, 4. Wandrings and coldness in prayer, 5. To forget to watch for that I pray for, 6. Apt to murmer because I have no more, and yet ready to abuse what I have, 7. I can do none of those things which God commands me, but my corruptions will thrust in themselves; when I would do good, evil is present with me.

These things I continuallie see and feel, and am afflicted and oppressed with; yet the Wisdom of God doth order them for my good: 1. They make me abhor myself; 2. They keep me from trusting my heart; 3. They convince me of the insufficiencie of all inherent righteousness; 4. They show me the necessity of flying to Jesus; 5. They press me to prey unto God; 6. They show me the need I have to watch and be sober; 7. And provoke me to look to God thorow Christ to help me, and carry me thorow this world.<sup>102</sup>

Although these are startling admissions in themselves – and they would seem to be at odds with received assumptions about Bunyan's spiritual autobiography like those of Roger Sharrock when he writes that 'the revelations that signal the soul's release [in *Grace Abounding*] ... have nothing doubtful in them'<sup>103</sup> – it is Bunyan's next clause, when he declares that 'These things I continuallie see and feel, and am afflicted and oppressed with', that we become aware of the doubt, the lack of conviction he has in his elect status.

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<sup>102</sup> *Grace Abounding*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>103</sup> Roger Sharrock, 'Temptation and Understanding in *Grace Abounding*', *Bunyan Studies* 1: Autumn 1988, p. 5.

This apparent lack of closure is hardly unique in the Puritan conversion narrative<sup>104</sup> and yet it remains a jarring fact that a text composed with the intention of recording the journey to salvation – and in the process giving pastoral support to those embarking upon similar journeys – fails to provide any sense of spiritual reconciliation. For all the soul-searching and overcoming the most severe depressions and religious doubts, Bunyan's mind remains as much a differend as it has been throughout the narrative. Taking Jean-Francois Lyotard's illustration of how the differend can manifest itself in the structure of society, we might also gauge the impact the search for proof of election might have on the psyche of the dissenting nonconformist. Lyotard posits that a differend can arise from an ideological difference and offers the following example of one between labour-power and capital:

By what well-formed phrase and by means of what establishment procedure can the worker affirm before the labor arbitrator that what one yields to one's boss for so many hours per week in exchange for a salary is *not* a commodity?... The differend is signalled by this inability to prove.<sup>105</sup>

The irreconcilability of the philosophical conflict that exists between capital and labour is analogous to that between Bunyan's desperate need for confirmation of salvation and the internal doubt that prevents him from attaining it. To use Lyotard's phraseology, the heterogeneity Bunyan experiences with regard to his own spiritual thought process would appear to prevent any notion of soteriological hegemony or grand narrative – which in this case would be election – from asserting influence over Bunyan's individuality. For Bunyan of course, this state is a negative one and is the cause of his depression and paranoia, both symptoms being self-perpetuating. The despair he communicates through his spiritual autobiography is the result of the lack of an imperialist grand narrative. But then perhaps that lack is the real experience of all dissenting nonconformists in that they all share a distrust of

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<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, the less-than-convincing conclusion to Laurence Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found* or Agnes Beaumont's unsettling final remarks in her *Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*.

<sup>105</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 10.

hegemonic authority – be that the Church, political power, or whatever – and yet still ultimately yearn for a structured, empirical salvation.

## **Conversion and Differend**

Individualism or rather the necessity of distancing oneself from the mainstream was perhaps the most crucial aspect of dissenting culture. Keeble writes that ‘Nonconformity was, in its very nature, an individualist witness, and that individualism is abundantly in evidence in the characters, backgrounds, opinions and styles of its writers’<sup>106</sup>, and it is this impression of the dissenting sectarian that endures. Christopher Hill defines the protestant sectaries as being masterless men who had ‘chosen the condition of masterlessness by opting out of the state church, so closely modelled on the hierarchical structure of society’<sup>107</sup>. Nonconformists may have chosen a path of individualism to escape hegemony yet their ultimate aim – at least in the case of those under discussion here – was to attain a most universal ideal.

Bunyan can be particularly pliable with regard to ideas of faith and is often quick to strive for the ideals he observes in others. In the famous episode where Bunyan over-hears ‘three or four poor women sitting at a door in the Sun, and talking about the things of God’, he is inspired by the simple, honest spirituality of everyday working people,

Thus therefore when I had heard and considered what they said, I left them, and went about my employment again: but their talk and discourse went with me, also my heart would tarry with them, for I was greatly affected with their words, both because by them I was convinced that I wanted the true tokens of a truly godly man, and also because by them I was convinced of the happy and blessed condition of him that was such a one.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 143.

<sup>107</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 41.

<sup>108</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 15.

Although Bunyan stresses that in this instance he is inspired by ‘people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours’ – again praising the virtues of individualism – and is satisfied that the doctrine these women held to had integrity, his encounter with them was not his first exposure to ideas that were to inspire him, nor were they all so upstanding. Bunyan had previously come under the influence of religious figures with rather negative results:

I fell in company with one poor man that made profession of Religion; who, as I then thought, did talk pleasantly of the Scriptures, and of the matters of Religion: wherefore falling into some love and liking to what he said, I betook me to my Bible, and began to take great pleasure in reading, but especially with the historical part thereof: for, as for *Pauls* Epistles, and Scriptures of that nature, I could not away with them, being as yet but ignorant either of the corruptions of my nature, or of the want and worth of Jesus Christ to save me.<sup>109</sup>

Bunyan’s spirituality has at this point something of an itinerant quality about it. Uncertain as to his own religious position – there is, in fact, more than one suggestion of Bunyan’s identification with atheist tendencies – he is content to experience scripture and faith through the experiences of others culminating in his notorious exposure to perhaps the most extreme sectarian belief system:

About this time I met with some *Ranters* books, that were put forth by some of our Country men; which Books were also highly in esteem by several old Professors; some of these I read, but was not able to make a Judgement about them; wherefore, as I read in them, and thought upon them, feeling myself unable to judge, I should betake myself to hearty prayer.<sup>110</sup>

That Bunyan should be unable to judge the merits of one dissenting sect over another should not be thought of as an indication of his over-arching lack of conviction; he has yet to understand fully the enormity of the spiritual progress he must undergo if his salvation is to be confirmed. That he reverts to further doubt after successfully avoiding these ‘*Ranting*

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

Errors' certainly does give an indication of the pliability of his faith. To still have 'inclinations to unbelief' post-conversion is a rather sobering statement, and presents a lack of closure indicative of the postmodern cyclical mental state that is symptomatic of the nonconformist tradition.

It is easy to agree with Lynch's assertion that 'The narrative process of *Grace Abounding* puts 'an *if*' upon its own enterprise'<sup>111</sup>. The act of writing a spiritual autobiography does not, in this instance, come anywhere near to confirming salvation. The mind of the individual is at least now open to the *possibility* of election, where before the conversion process there was only despair, but no real certainty ever exists. As a pastoral device then, spiritual autobiography (one intended as this one was, for publication) should be seen as a form of spiritual encouragement, not an instructional tool.

*Grace Abounding* is built upon doubt. Bunyan's path to apparent confirmation of salvation is strewn with false hope and uncertainty. After one religious epiphany during which the author's heart is 'filled full of comfort and hope', he is almost immediately plunged into a self-induced state of reprobation:

but alas! within less than forty days I began to question all again.<sup>112</sup>

Temptation – as Bunyan puts it, although his insistence on regarding himself as being a reprobate stems almost entirely from an internal disbelief in his soteriological prospects rather than from any external influences like those acted out upon Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* – confounds election. The result is devastating:

first all my comfort was taken from me, then darkness seized upon me; after which whole floods of Blasphemies, both against God, Christ, and the scriptures, was poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Beth Lynch, *John Bunyan and the Language of Conviction*, p. 76.

<sup>112</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 30.

In a study of predestination in relation to Bunyan's fiction, Stuart Sim considers the impact Calvinist theology has as contributing 'a basic framework and set of sequences which automatically generate acute personal conflicts, moral dilemmas, and ideological contradictions'.<sup>114</sup> The intense self-scrutiny Bunyan subjects himself to in *Grace Abounding* only serves to heighten such effects and plays upon the already acute sense of doubt that drives the conversion narrative. As Sim goes on to say, 'These paradoxes surrounding predestination and soteriology cast doubt on the validity of human action and decision making, thus bringing to the fore the problem of free will'.<sup>115</sup> Bunyan certainly records innumerable examples of the effect soteriological crises have on his ability to act upon them; the impact of this paradoxical situation again brings to the fore a classic differend:

I found it hard work now to pray to God, because despair was swallowing me up.<sup>116</sup>

That the irreconcilability of this conflict is internalised lends further doubt to Bunyan's already turbulent psychological state. He is unable to reconcile his soteriological aspirations of election with his secular decision making – he is continually driven to sinful behaviour in spite of repeated attempts to adhere to predestinarian doctrine and his self-perpetuating inner conflict creates a mood of distrust within his own conscience. The autobiographical nature of *Grace Abounding* gives this mood an immediacy that sets it apart from Bunyan's allegorical fictions, particularly its literary and spiritual successor, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This text is not a warning to prospective pilgrims, it is an admission of guilt.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>114</sup> Stuart Sim, *Negotiations with Paradox* (1990) pp. 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 49.

## The Transference of Spiritual Conflict to *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Bunyan's most celebrated allegory, the perennially popular *Pilgrim's Progress*, is often seen as a fictionalised rewrite of *Grace Abounding*<sup>117</sup>. Although this position is refuted somewhat by Richard L. Greaves who has written that '*The Pilgrim's Progress* is not an allegorical rewriting of *Grace Abounding*,' and that 'Most of *Grace Abounding* deals with Bunyan's conversion experience and the preceding events, whereas the greater part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (some 77 percent) follows Christian's conversion,'<sup>118</sup> the close parallels between the two texts are undeniable. Published more than a decade after his spiritual autobiography, Bunyan's allegory retains a great number of the thematic concerns dealt with in that text and, as Greaves goes on to say, '[t]he allegory's indebtedness to *Grace Abounding* is substantial.'<sup>119</sup> If this is true, how does the sense of doubt, the lack of spiritual legitimization that I have posited exists at the end of *Grace Abounding*, manifest itself in Bunyan's allegorical masterpiece and how might Bunyan's distrust in his soteriological position affect our reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress*?

By reimagining his personal spiritual journey as something of a romance – as far from the Puritan ideal as is possible – Bunyan has been charged with accusations of hypocrisy since, as Harold Golder stated vehemently, '[he] outwardly abhorred romance, and yet secretly lived in a romantic world'.<sup>120</sup> This argument has been countered by Kenneth Chong who suggests that 'Bunyan's strategy is to tempt his readers so he can instruct them in truth'.<sup>121</sup> Chong goes on to assert that the differend (as it were) between Puritan doctrine and the romance form of Bunyan's allegory rests not with the writer, but with the audience: 'the

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<sup>117</sup> See, for example, G. B. Harrison, *John Bunyan: A Study in Personality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company) 1928.

<sup>118</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 230.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p. 231.

<sup>120</sup> Harold Golder, 'John Bunyan's Hypocrisy', *North American Review*, 223: 1926, p. 331.

<sup>121</sup> Kenneth Chong, 'Enchanting the Reader in *The Pilgrim's Progress*', *Bunyan Studies*, 12: 2006/ 2007, p. 83.

tension of enchantment and doctrine [lies] not in the author but in the reader, with the consequence of acquitting Bunyan from the charge of hypocrisy and laying the charge where it now belongs – on the reader.’<sup>122</sup> This thesis is not concerned directly with that particular debate but it does, however, illustrate one of the stylistic differences between *Grace Abounding* and its fictionalized successor: that of the placement of physical, spiritual, and psychological conflict in both narratives. Christian’s perilous journey to salvation sees him thrust into a number of conflicts and temptations that threaten his single-minded search for the Celestial City. Figures like Pliable, Obstinate, and the giant, Despair, all represent aspects of Bunyan’s state of mind as represented in his spiritual autobiography. Where it differs from *Grace Abounding* is in its presentation of the author’s spiritual crisis. By portraying his emotional turmoil as characters in a drama, Bunyan externalises his desperate search for signs of election – whereas in *Grace Abounding* the turmoil is necessarily internal – and in turn creates a detailed observation of the society from which he is attempting to escape.

N.H. Keeble is correct when he writes that ‘The folk tale conventions and romance motifs of Part I [of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*], besides telling us something of Bunyan’s own youthful reading, imply an originally intended readership rather below the level of yeomen, the people who bought chapbooks and popular romances’.<sup>123</sup> If this is correct then Bunyan’s imagined readership of his allegory reflects the environment in which his early reprobate self existed. It also lends weight to Kenneth Chong’s reading outlined above – Bunyan is not only externalizing his soteriological crises, but is also inviting his audience to scrutinize their own spiritual conscience, to come to their own conclusions by penetrating his allegorical romance and identifying the doctrine within. Bunyan is essentially passing his own differend – the warring little narratives scrutinized obsessively, and to no satisfactory conclusion, in

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>123</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 143.



*Grace Abounding* – on to those who, presumably shared the reprobate qualities of the Bunyan we find at the beginning of his spiritual autobiography; one who

Did still let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the Law of God: so that until I came to the state of marriage, I was the very ringleader of all the Youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness.<sup>124</sup>

It could be said that this is Bunyan at the pulpit, sermonizing to the prospective elect – and it should be remembered here that *The Pilgrim's Progress* appeared twelve years after *Grace Abounding* – and yet although he is presenting a spiritual ideal in the form of Christian's flight from reprobation, he is also inviting potential pilgrims onto a cyclical path where there are as many Giant Despairs, Doubting Castles, and Pliables, as there are Celestial Cities or authoritative evils like Apollyon. He is suggesting they embrace a lack of legitimation that he himself finds irresolute (although it could be said that God's authority imposes itself upon Bunyan, suppressing the differend in the form of the promise of grace) and embark upon a search for what Lyotard would refer to as a phrase-regimen, an engagement with the language of the Bible, with which to find evidence of personal salvation.

Another important element Bunyan successfully adapts from *Grace Abounding* is the sense that the role of the Christian on Earth is essentially pedestrian, that the dominance of predestinarian doctrine renders the individual powerless with regard to their soteriological status, be it elect or reprobate. Christopher Hill posits a similar argument when he concludes that,

Bunyan's Christian got rid of his burden only after he had turned away from the world and its works through the strait gate, and had accepted the cross. Then the burden rolled off his back, no thanks to any effort of his.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> Christopher Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 408.

This externalised spiritual influence is not just the product of any fictional rewriting it is, on closer inspection, a dominant factor in Bunyan's autobiographical writing; indeed Bunyan's introduction to the close scrutiny of spiritual texts – and as a result, of his own soteriological destiny – comes only after his wife is bequeathed a small collection of 'godly books' and is then, as Maxine Hancock writes, able to make 'a quite natural transfer of reading skills from chapbook adventure stories to the more challenging materials of biblical narrative'<sup>126</sup>.

Bunyan's pilgrimage to find signs of election comes about not through any heightened sense of piety but rather through fear and accidental external influence.

### **Stylistic Differend**

In *Grace Abounding* the influence of experimental Calvinism is a stylistic convention that motivates the composition of such a text, whereas the allegorical setting of *The Pilgrim's Progress* dictates that Bunyan instead allows predestinarian doctrine to filter through caricatures like Hopeful, Mr Worldly Wiseman, and the jury of Vanity while retaining some sense of fictional realism. While Bunyan's use of allegory is hardly subtle and makes extensive use of Biblical marginal notes – as William W.E. Slights points out, these notes often 'tells the reader the sense of allegory'<sup>127</sup> – it is nevertheless effective in its reassertion of the religious doubt communicated in *Grace Abounding*. The internal conflict alluded to in the spiritual autobiography is here presented as dramatic dialogues between the prospectively elect Christian and all manner of reprobate stereotypes. Stuart Sim and David Walker see the resultant perpetual differend as being

At once a liberating and a daunting prospect, since it leaves an elect individual like Christian in a state of almost perpetual conflict with his fellow human beings, and

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<sup>126</sup> Maxine Hancock, 'Bunyan as Reader: The Record of *Grace Abounding*', in *Bunyan Studies* 5: 1994, p. 69.

<sup>127</sup> William W.E. Slights, 'Bunyan on the Edge', in *Bunyan Studies* 10:2001/ 2002, p. 34.

continually needing to prove and assert the authority for his conduct – to himself as much as his adversaries... While predestinarian theory provides a considerable bulwark against the insecurity that such conflict almost inevitably induces, it cannot remove it entirely while life's journey is still in progress.<sup>128</sup>

Here, the rather repetitive psychological fluctuation experienced by Bunyan – and written about with such painful candour in his spiritual autobiography – is now the basis of a series of beautifully drawn vignettes, of conflicts both verbal and physical that serve as effective didactic tools. Here for instance we have a typical example of Bunyan's autobiographical self-doubt followed by an episode from Christian's encounter with the Giant Despair in Doubting Castle:

And now I began to labour to call again time that was past; wishing a thousand times twice told, that the day was yet to come, when I should be tempted to such a sin; concluding with great indignation, both against my heart and all assaults, how I would rather have been torn in pieces, than found a consenter thereto: but alas! these thoughts and wishings, and resolvings, were now too late to help me; the thought passed my heart, God hath let me go, and I am fallen.<sup>129</sup>

They told him, they were Pilgrims, and that they had lost their way, Then said the *Giant*, You have this night trespassed on me, by trampling in, and lying on my grounds, and therefore you must go along with me. So they were forced to go, because he was stronger than they. They also had but little to say, for they knew themselves in a fault... Now in this place, *Christian* had double sorrow, because 'twas through his unadvised haste that they were brought into this distress.<sup>130</sup>

The parallels with regard to intent are obvious but it is with regard to tone that the two texts differ markedly. The first-person subjective admission of guilt is here replaced by a parable or sermon that relies less upon emotive experimental writing and more upon reader response – again placing emphasis upon the audience – to communicate the spiritual message. In both instances a differend is identified and a mood of spiritual conflict exists. Similarly,

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<sup>128</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 133.

<sup>129</sup> *Grace Abounding*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>130</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1984, p. 93.

Christian's pilgrimage – although it's more reasonable to describe this section as a panicked flight from reprobation – opens with a series of disputes, all of which appear irresolvable. There is Christian's internal doubt: 'what shall I do?', the disbelief of his family when he relates to them the destruction to come, and of course the dialogue he enters into with Pliable and Obstinate where we begin to see the workings of Bunyan's allegorical nomenclature:

*Obst. Tush, said Obstinate, way with your Book; will you go back with us, or no?*

*Chr. No, not I, said the other; because I have laid my hand to the Plow.*

*Obst. Come then, Neighbour Pliable, let us turn again, and go home without him; there is a company of these Craz'd-headed Coxcombs, that when they take a fancy by the end, are wiser in their own eyes then seven men that can render a reason.*

*Pli. Then said Pliable, Don't revile; if what the good Christian says is true, the things he looks after are better then ours; my heart inclines to go with my Neighbour.*

*Obst. What! more fools still? be ruled by me and go back; who knows whither such a brain-sick fellow will lead you? Go back, go back, and be wise.*

*Chr. Come with me Neighbour Pliable, there are such things to be had which I spoke of, and many more Glories besides; If you believe not me, read here in this Book; and for the truth of what is exprest therein, behold, all is confirmed by the blood of him that made it.*

*Pli. Well Neighbour Obstinate (said Pliable) I begin to come to a point; I intend to go along with this good man, and to cast in my lot with him: But my good companion, do you know the way to this desired place?<sup>131</sup>*

The dispute here resides perhaps in the mind of Pliable who resembles the Bunyan of *Grace Abounding*, and the whole episode recalls strongly the internal conflict that arises in that text from Bunyan's self-scrutiny and resultant spiritual doubt.

Far from distancing the reader from the material's didactic message, Bunyan's skilful allegorical sensibility allows the nonconformist sentiment to take hold and at the same time results in a highly readable text that, apart from the Bible, is perhaps the most widely read piece of literature written in English. As N. H. Keeble notes,

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

It is, indeed, remarkable how little we rely upon the narrator for our information. Much of the immediacy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* derives from the fact that, as in drama, we hear the characters directly in dialogue.<sup>132</sup>

This is of course a major stylistic difference between the highly personal autobiographical text and the allegorical romance and as a result this affects the method by which Bunyan relates his internal spiritual conflict. Although Bunyan does write about the population of Bedfordshire in *Grace Abounding*, and indeed mentions specific figures by name, he rarely allows them their own voice and instead we receive their speech, and their doctrine, through Bunyan's dominant autobiographical narration. The result is that even a figure of such great importance as John Gifford who ministered at the Bedford church and had, as Bunyan states in *Grace Abounding*, a huge impact upon his spiritual growth, becomes something of a thematic tool, a means by which Bunyan can communicate his own soteriological turmoil rather than a tangible being, even an allegorical one:

About this time I began to break my mind to those poor people in *Bedford*, and to tell them my condition: which, when they had heard, they told *Mr. Gifford* of me, who himself also took occasion to talke with me, and was willing to be well perswaded of me, though I think but from little grounds; but he invited me to his house, where I should hear him confer with others about the dealings of God with the Soul: from all which I still received more conviction, and from that time began to see something of the vanity and inward wretchedness of my wicked heart, for as yet I knew no greater matter therein, but now it began to be discovered unto me, and also to worke at that rate for wickedness as it never did before.<sup>133</sup>

The realism here comes from the internalized, almost stream of consciousness, voice of Bunyan as he encounters the endless series of differends whereas *The Pilgrim's Progress* presents similar situations in a more dynamic if fanciful way. The dialogues into which Christian and Faithful enter on the road provide not only parallels with the sort of thematic

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<sup>132</sup> N.H. Keeble (ed.), *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. xv.

<sup>133</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 25.

material Bunyan communicated in his spiritual autobiography, but also humanize it, gives it a wider context, and an external voice. The problem of each differend, however, remains; for instance:

*Faith.* I escaped the Slow that I perceive you fell into, and got up to the Gate without that danger; only I met with one whose name was *Wanton*, that had like to have done me a mischief.

*Chr.* 'Twas well you escaped her Net; Joseph was hard put to it by her, and he escaped her as you did, but it had like to have cost him his life. But what did she do to you?

*Faith.* You cannot think (but that you know something) what a flattering tongue she had: she lay at me hard to turn aside with her, promising me all manner of content.

*Chr.* Nay, she did not promise you the content of a good conscience.

*Faith.* You know what I mean, all carnal and fleshly content.

*Chr.* Thank God you have escaped her: The abhorred of the Lord shall fall into her Ditch.

*Faith.* Nay, I know not whether I did wholly escape her, or no.<sup>134</sup>

Apart from the rather salacious questioning of Christian regarding what *exactly* it was Wanton offered Faithful (another example of the allegory's appeal to readers of cheap romances) the passage quoted above shows how Bunyan incorporated his religious uncertainty, his distrust of the grand narrative of strength through certainty of election, into the allegorical situations of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Faithful does not know that he 'wholly' escaped Wanton's assault in the same way that Bunyan's psychological turmoil spirals into a depressive state immediately after his uplifting dialogue with John Gifford. In the same way that Bunyan portrays a different sense of realism in his spiritual autobiography and his allegory, so too does the manner in which he communicates the cumulative differends differ in each text.

Whilst it is true that Bunyan lost none of the immediacy of *Grace Abounding* in his fictionalized version – indeed, to some extent, as I have shown, the immediacy is in some

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<sup>134</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 57.

ways heightened – he also retains the self-absorbed, rather selfish exclusion of his family from both the text and his journey. Although this is later addressed in the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which his wife sets out on a similar pilgrimage, the initial allegory (published 6 years before Part II) makes a point of showing Christian's flight from the City of Destruction despite the pleas of his family,

So I saw in my Dream, that the Man began to run; Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it began to cry after him to return: but the Man put his fingers in his Ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life: so he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain.<sup>135</sup>

The rather comedic image of the nonconformist Christian fleeing his ostensibly safe home with his fingers thrust into his ears to block out the sound of his children begging him to return is, nevertheless, a somewhat chilling indication of the desperation Bunyan must have experienced during his spiritual crisis and reveals the uncertainty and the discontent he feels with regard to his spiritual standing. Christian is so disturbed by the pleas of his family to return to the City of Destruction he quite literally blocks his ears as if to stop the cacophony of competing phrase regimens and his headlong flight which later becomes a pilgrimage is the unavoidable result of this differend.<sup>136</sup> This attention to detail with regard to the implications Christian/ Bunyan's pilgrimage had on his domestic life is one of a number of differences, some might say improvements, between the two versions of the author's record of his religious conversion. It is also perhaps the reason why Bunyan is now regarded as being what Christopher Hill suggests as, 'a classical writer in the "Great Tradition", the timeless and remote object of academic establishment criticism and university examination

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<sup>135</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>136</sup> The geographical displacement seen here as being the result of Bunyan/ Christian's soteriological differend is seen in an even more explicit manner in Richard Norwood's *Confessions*. I investigate this fully in Chapter 4.

questions.’<sup>137</sup> With that in mind, I would like to turn briefly to look at how the themes discussed here, particularly the explicit sense of unresolved doubt with regard to grace, impacted upon the fiction of Daniel Defoe whose work has been studied in relation to Bunyan<sup>138</sup> and who reimagined the spiritual autobiography in an altogether more realistic form.

### **Defoe, Spiritual Autobiography, and Doubt**

The incessant doubt heaped upon the Bunyan of *Grace Abounding* has later parallels in the fiction of Daniel Defoe. Of Defoe’s novels, perhaps *Robinson Crusoe* maintains the closest links with classic spiritual autobiography but it can be said that the protagonists of *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders* also suffer the same psychological turmoil and communicate in their respective narratives a similar sense of threat against salvation. As Sim notes,

dominant cultural values, including soteriological beliefs, are put under stress and shown to contain logical contradictions which problematise human decision making. Defoe’s protagonists must learn to live with the anxiety and insecurity that exposure to such contradictions creates, and this almost inevitably reinforces their acute sense of self.<sup>139</sup>

Defoe’s stylistic debt to spiritual autobiography is overshadowed by this reading of his fiction which also perfectly captures the contradictory mood evident in *Grace Abounding*. Acute scepticism, with regard to the received secular and spiritual values of early-modern England, is a trait shared by the eponymous protagonists of Defoe’s fiction, and the John Bunyan who

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<sup>137</sup> Christopher Hill, ‘Bunyan’s Contemporary Reputation’, in Laurence, Owens, and Sim (eds.) *John Bunyan and his England 1628-88* (London: The Hambledon Press) 1990, p. 3.

<sup>138</sup> See in particular, G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1965, Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus) 1957, and Stuart Sim, *Negotiations with Paradox*.

<sup>139</sup> Stuart Sim, *Negotiations with Paradox*, p. 110.



comes under such close scrutiny in his spiritual autobiography. *Grace Abounding* is in some respects a series of contradictory observations that problematise the author's search for evidence of salvation. Bunyan presents himself here as the 'chief of sinners', and although this is something of a generic constituent of spiritual autobiography (one that goes back as far as Augustine's *Confessions*) in the case of Bunyan it prevents him finding proof of his salvation. Autobiographical convention dictates certain textual inclusions that expose these contradictions. Bunyan's account of his early life, for instance, alludes to now famous episodes in which he escapes – in a seemingly miraculous fashion – otherwise fatal dangers only to remain as riotous and ungodly as he had previously been,

Here, as I said, were Judgements and Mercy, but neither of them did awaken my soul to Righteousness, wherefore, I sinned still, and grew more rebellious against God, and careless of mine own salvation.<sup>140</sup>

Bunyan's scepticism towards religion and the possibility of his salvation is manifested in a lack of conviction that borders on contrariness; feelings of guilt awakened by a particularly fiery sermon are quickly forgotten,

This, for that instant, did benum the sinews of my best delights, and did imbitter my former pleasures to me: but behold, it lasted not; for before I had well dined, the trouble began to go off in my minde, and my heart returned to its old course.<sup>141</sup>

More striking is his unwillingness to allow the stirrings of spirituality that do spark his interest in faith and church-going to advance any further and his scepticism begins to read more like bloody-mindedness:

I fell in very eagerly with the Religion of the times, to wit, to go to Church twice a day, and that too with the foremost, and there should very devoutly both say and sing as others did; yet retaining my wicked life.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> *ibid*, p. 10.

The spiritual autobiography necessitates this kind of admission if only to set up the eventual conversion and is certainly a recognisable trait in the form. Bunyan's insecurity, however, continues long after his spiritual awakening and even beyond his calling to minister so, far from being a literary device against which he can emphasize the strength of his state of grace, Bunyan's statement of the 'wicked life' he claims to have escaped reads more like the backdrop to his sustained depression. Rather than proving his salvation, Bunyan's sins continue to haunt him.

When considering Defoe's writing in relation to the self-inflicted internal crises of John Bunyan, it is *Moll Flanders* in particular who displays a lack of conviction in her soteriological state at the end of the novel raising the same doubts found in a reading of *Grace Abounding*. In neither instance do we suspect disbelief in salvation on the part of the individual concerned, rather a lack of certainty that confirmation of election has been attained or ever can be assured. Read alongside each other, the conclusions of *Moll Flanders* and *Grace Abounding* share a startlingly similar sentiment, not of despair but more like a resigned sense of quiet doubt:

And now notwithstanding all the Fatigues, and all the Miseries we have both gone thro', we are both in good Heart and Health; my Husband remain'd there sometime after me to settle our Affairs, and at first I had intended to go back to him, but at his desire I alter'd that Resolution, and he is come over to *England* also, where we resolve to spend the Remainder of our Years in sincere Penitence, for the wicked Lives we have lived.<sup>143</sup>

Wherefore, thought I, the point being thus, I am for going on, and venturing my eternal state with Christ, whether I have comfort here or no; if God doth not come in, thought I, I will leap off the Ladder even blindfold into Eternitie, sink or swim, come

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<sup>142</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, ed. David Blewett (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1989, p. 427.

heaven, come hell; Lord Jesus, if thou wilt catch me, do; if not, I will venture for thy Name.<sup>144</sup>

For Moll Flanders to be *resolved* to spend what time she has left in penitence does not instil much confidence with regard to her sense of salvation and she is clearly not in a position of soteriological confidence. Bunyan's declaration is even less persuasive and it could be argued that this single passage negates any protestations of confirmation that might have gone before. As an indication of the spiritual turmoil he continues to experience the reader need only look to a statement that follows this one in which Bunyan exclaims that, 'Now was my heart full of comfort'. Such a contradictory state of mind impresses upon the reader the immediacy of Bunyan's soteriological anxiety. This is not necessarily evidence of his state of election, rather a declaration of his scepticism that, given the age in which he lived, could only ever manifest itself as paranoia and doubt.

For Bunyan, the possibility of falling back into a state of reprobation is always a very real threat – one to which he succumbs innumerable times during the course of *Grace Abounding* – and so it should be expected that he would, at the conclusion of the narrative, experience further bouts of despair. Like Moll, whose salvation – however anecdotal – is marred by a shadow of insecurity, Bunyan's similarly suffers from a lack of closure. The definitive autobiography is of course impossible since its composition implies the continuation of the author's life beyond the confines of the text. Bunyan published *Grace Abounding* some twenty years before his death which calls into question the validity of the autobiographical narrative with regard to authoritarian resolutions like election. This is something to which Defoe alluded in his preface to *Moll Flanders* in which he admits,

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<sup>144</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 101.

We cannot say indeed, that this History is carried on quite to the End of the Life of this famous *Moll Flanders*, as she calls her self, for no Body can write their own Life to the full End of it, unless they can write it after they are dead.<sup>145</sup>

Despite this admission, Defoe grounded his novel firmly within the tradition of the improving conversion narrative and his preface does read like that of a dissenting spiritual autobiography:

this Work is chiefly recommended to those who know how to Read it, and how to make the good Uses of it, which the Story all along recommends to them, so it is to be hop'd that such Readers will be much more pleas'd with the Moral than the Fable, with the Application than with the Relation, and with the End of the Writer than with the Life of the Person written of.<sup>146</sup>

In his preface, Defoe stresses the authenticity of what he calls the author's 'private History' and suggests that the novel be read for its moral didacticism. This authenticity extends as far as the novel's conclusion where a superficially converted Moll presents what Stuart Sim calls a 'suggestion of false resolution'<sup>147</sup> when her 'conversion' mirrors the self-delusion Bunyan suffers in *Grace Abounding*. Her penitence is driven by necessity and suggests a soteriological state as fluid as that seen in spiritual autobiographies.

Defoe, like Bunyan, is of course writing to an assumed audience whose expectations would have been modelled through Calvinist predestinarian doctrine. Those expectations would surely have included a sound morality and an empirical conclusion. Bunyan is certainly aiming to challenge and improve his audience and would have been fully aware of the scrutiny his text would be subjected to by its readers. As Keeble has stated:

Nonconformist writing presupposed a reader. Its composition was not a private pursuit for personal ends (however personal its immediate occasion and inspiration

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<sup>145</sup> Defoe, Daniel, *Moll Flanders*, p. 42.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, pp. 38-39.

<sup>147</sup> Stuart Sim, *Negotiations with Paradox*, p. 155.

may have been), but a public service, and, furthermore, a service whose full performance demanded not only diligence in writing but an equal diligence in transmitting the text to potential readers and in persuading them to acquire it, read it and act upon it. Nonconformist texts were very rarely thought of as having intrinsic merit; their virtue resided in their potential to transform lives.<sup>148</sup>

Like Defoe, Bunyan directed his writing towards those who ‘know how to Read it,’ so to produce a work so startlingly plagued by anxiety, doubt, and lack of legitimacy was an act of real bravery. Having said that, we have to wonder just how closely an audience would examine the minutiae of the text and how many would be carried along by the implications outlined on the title page as to the spiritual outcome; neither text would appear to deliver on either count. Although it is beyond the remit of the present study, it would be interesting to follow this line of argument further to see how a reassessment of the impact of Calvinist doctrine on spiritual autobiography affects our understanding of the early novel, and this is something I’d like to return to briefly again in later chapters to illustrate the importance of the genre within the lineage of literary history. The following section will now build on the observations I have made here and, returning to the main argument, investigate Bunyan’s spiritual deficit in relation to his perceived spiritual intent.

### **Differends, little narratives, and Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding***

Doubt and fluctuation drive the narrative of *Grace Abounding* at a rattling pace and we cannot fail to be struck by the immediacy of the spiritual peril Bunyan thought himself to be in. His predestinarian logic gnaws at any spiritual positives until we see a man unable to trust in his prospects of election:

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<sup>148</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 135.

And I was thus before the Lord, that Scripture fastned on my heart, *O man, great is thy Faith*, Matt. 15. 28. even as if one had clapt me on the back, as I lay on my knees before *God*; yet I was not able to believe this, that this was a prayer of Faith, till almost six months after; for I could not think that I had Faith, or that there should be a word for me to act Faith on; therefore I should still be as sticking in the jaws of desperation, and went mourning up and down in a sad condition, crying, *Is his mercy clean gone? is his mercy clean gone for ever?* And I thought sometimes, even while I was groaning in these expressions, they did seem to make a question whether it was or no; yet I greatly feared it was.<sup>149</sup>

Bunyan writes that he was ‘not able to believe’ and ‘could not think’ that he had faith. This is self-doubt fuelled, not by experiential evidence of reprobation, but rather extreme, unhealthy self-scrutiny. This, I would argue, is what Bunyan communicates in his spiritual autobiography. The fact that he returns to themes of disbelief so regularly, and that these periods of disbelief are as strong towards the end of the narrative – even after the apparent conversion experience – as they are at its beginning suggests that his empirical spiritual reconciliation, his grand narrative of evidence of salvation, is as fleeting as it appears to be in the passage quoted above. That he continues to assert this position means that any notion of Bunyan’s spiritual growth assumes the form of a cyclical pattern without resolution; the reality of Bunyan’s soteriological state does not follow the linear progress to which he aspires and as a result, the message of *Grace Abounding* retains a pessimistic edge, that dissents from its own claims, leaving behind unresolved little narratives.

To take this point further, it is worth examining more closely to what extent Bunyan accepts the irreconcilability of what I would call his soteriological differend. Stuart Sim makes a similar claim with regard to the notion of individual will versus God’s will in *Grace Abounding* when he writes:

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<sup>149</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 63.

We have narratives which in psychological terms of reference cannot be reconciled, and the angst of the spiritual autobiographical protagonist (and surely no one has ever caught this better than Bunyan has in *Grace Abounding*) is an acknowledgement that a differend exists which calls into question the whole basis of one's grand narrative.<sup>150</sup>

Bunyan unquestionably displays acute angst – and with unflinching honesty – in his writing and he appears to be aware of its underlying presence when he is ostensibly in a state of grace,

Now began I afresh to give myself up to a serious examination after my state and condition for the future, and of my Evidences for that blessed world to come; for it hath, I bless the name of God, been my usual course, as alwayes, so especially in the day of affliction, to endeavour to keep my interest in Life to come, clear before my eye.

But I had no sooner began to recall to mind my former experience of the goodness of God to my Soul, but there came flocking into my mind an innumerable company of my sins and transgressions, amongst which these were at this time most to my affliction, namely, my deadness, dulness, and coldness in holy Duties; my wandrings of heart, my wearisomness in all good things, my want of love to God, his wayes, and people, with this at the end of all, *Are these the fruits of Christianity? are these the tokens of a blessed man?*<sup>151</sup>

It is as if Bunyan's natural state is one of reprobation, punctuated only occasionally by glimpses of the possibility – the hope – of salvation. It is a fatalistic position to adopt and evidence perhaps of Bunyan's acceptance of the conflicting little narratives – the doubt, hope, despair – that make concrete evidence of election impossible. Sim continues his argument by suggesting that, 'Those post-conversion backslidings to which the author admits he remains prone in the closing passages of *Grace Abounding*, the "many turnings and goings upon my heart both from the Lord, Satan, and my own corruptions", might be read as the return of the

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<sup>150</sup> Stuart Sim, 'Bunyan, Lyotard, and the Conflict of Narratives (or, Postmodernising Bunyan)', *Bunyan Studies*, 8: 1998, p. 74.

<sup>151</sup> *Grace Abounding*, pp. 79-80.

differend,<sup>152</sup> I would argue that the differend never goes away, that Bunyan is reconciled to conflict from the outset, that he is unable to ever trust in God's grace, and that the 'post-conversion backslidings' are evidence of that.

Without any firm structure – other than the seemingly unassailable goal of salvation – upon which to base his experiences, and without a fixed belief in a Church or even in himself at this point, Bunyan's ability to negotiate his spiritual crises becomes increasingly impaired. As Roger Sharrock posits, 'the urgency of the personal experience at work is a continuing urgency and if some crisis or revelation seems to bring it to a climax another is always waiting in the wings'.<sup>153</sup> Bunyan is, at this stage, his own worst enemy and the personification of a differend. He is searching desperately for evidence of grand narrative and yet is encroached on by a constant stream of little narratives, each contending for his attention.

*Grace Abounding* shows Bunyan to be in dispute with just about every aspect of his internal and external world. Ostensibly a classic model of Puritan spiritual autobiography, and in many ways the text is the popular epitome of the form, it is also a record of the conflict Bunyan experiences both physically and psychologically during his progress through to salvation, his *conversion*, his grand narrative. In it, Bunyan records a series of emotional and spiritual breakdowns that constitute something of a crisis of legitimation and call into question his role as a writer of a classic spiritual autobiography, as well as his position as a minister, and so a spiritual role model, in his dissenting nonconformist community. The text casts doubt as to the success of his conversion experience, of its being the true confirmation of election it is supposed to be. It also identifies disputes within the core belief systems of the nonconformist sects. *Grace Abounding* would appear, in almost every sense, to epitomise

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<sup>152</sup> Stuart Sim, 'Bunyan, Lyotard, and the Conflict of Narratives', p. 74.

<sup>153</sup> Roger Sharrock, 'Temptation and Understanding in *Grace Abounding*', p. 8.



the conventional Puritan conversion narrative. Bunyan's spiritual autobiography was massively influential – something of an instruction manual to subsequent writers like his fellow Bedford church member Agnes Beaumont – and as we have seen, immortalised in its later fictionalised form as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is without doubt the only example of spiritual autobiography from the seventeenth century to boast anything approaching a popular readership today. That its survival is due in the main to the immense popularity of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, of which Christopher Hill writes that it was, 'a best-seller from the start among the middling and poorer sort, though despised by the literary establishment,'<sup>154</sup> cannot be denied; its importance as the most successful example of classic spiritual autobiography however – and Michael Davies's recent comments that other seventeenth-century examples are, 'rarely as detailed or as well-written as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*'<sup>155</sup> are difficult to dispute – is similarly assured. Its popularity and endurance aside though, *Grace Abounding* provides, for the purposes of the current study, a classic model that represents the failure of the spiritual autobiography as a genre and highlights the spiritual shortfall apparent among the radical nonconformists. This spiritual crisis, something I will identify as a soteriological differend, and its impact on *Grace Abounding* will be examined in the following section.

### **Spiritual Crisis and the Conversion Experience**

Roger Sharrock suggests that a period equating roughly to the first division of conventional spiritual autobiography – that relating to 'Unregenerate life: sin and resistance to the Gospel' – spans the first thirty-six sections of *Grace Abounding*. These sections, he posits, show Bunyan 'before conversion'. Although Sharrock concedes that Bunyan's narrative displays

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<sup>154</sup> Christopher Hill, 'Bunyan's Contemporary Reputation', in Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens, and Stuart Sim (eds.), *John Bunyan and His England 1628-88* (London and Runcorn: The Hambledon Press) 1990, p. 15.

<sup>155</sup> Michael Davies, 'Shaping Grace: The Spiritual Autobiographies of John Bunyan, John Newton, and William Cowper', *Bunyan Studies*, 12: 2006/2007, p. 42.

‘significant departures from the autobiographical norm’<sup>156</sup>, he maintains that the contents of the text can be grouped in a similar pattern to that suggested by Thomas Taylor in his *Profitable Memoriall of the Conversion of Mrs. Marie Gunter* (1633): a period of unregenerate life, an awakening or conversion, followed by a calling to minister. This opening section of *Grace Abounding* provides an outline of Bunyan’s early life during which time the author does involve himself in all manner of ‘cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God’<sup>157</sup> and so would seem to follow the prescribed pattern. The difficulty comes when we attempt to identify an event that leads to Bunyan’s conversion. Sharrock suggests that the conversion occurs over the course of sections thirty-seven to two-hundred and fifty-two but that conclusion is dependent upon there being a sense that Bunyan does eventually attain proof of salvation. There is much evidence to suggest that this is not the case and I would argue that there is, in fact, no conversion experience at all in *Grace Abounding*.

The process of conversion is, in Bunyan’s narrative, a drawn out, faltering process that extends over the vast majority of the text to no satisfactory conclusion. John Stachniewski admits it is ‘extremely difficult to say when Bunyan is converted’<sup>158</sup>, an understandable sentiment given that Bunyan himself finds it necessary to ask, ‘How can you tell you are Elected? and what if you should not? how then?’<sup>159</sup> It is nevertheless widely held that Bunyan is, by the end of *Grace Abounding*, in a state of grace, and Christopher Hill goes so far as to conclude that ‘looking back after six years of imprisonment Bunyan writes with the confident conviction of one whose elect status has been confirmed by martyrdom’.<sup>160</sup> I

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<sup>156</sup> Roger Sharrock, *Grace Abounding*, ‘Introduction’, p. xxx.

<sup>157</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 6,

<sup>158</sup> John Stachniewski, *Grace Abounding and Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xix.

<sup>159</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 21.

<sup>160</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 74.

would suggest that, conversely, Bunyan's predicament by the end of his spiritual autobiography is not resolved and that his elect status is still very much in doubt.

Rather than displaying any sense of conviction with regard to his salvation, Bunyan's writing throughout *Grace Abounding* is at best conflicted and at worst unconvincing.

Bunyan's lack of faith in his own salvation is a result of the despair he experiences after allowing himself to succumb to the temptations he himself constructs. These continual disappointments create a climate of paranoia and fear of his own personality and he becomes wary of soteriological evidence, aware that what he calls 'the hinder part of the Tempest', the nagging doubt that tempers every fleeting sense of hope, is a constant threat,

because my former frights and anguish were very sore and deep, therefore it did oft befall me as it befalleth those that have been scared by fire.<sup>161</sup>

This admission gives a startling insight into just how damaging Calvinistic doctrine could be to the puritan mind. Hill writes that 'This double sense of power – an individual self-confidence and strength through unity – produced that remarkable liberation of energy which is typical of Calvinism and the sects'<sup>162</sup>; neither sense of power can be found in the John Bunyan of *Grace Abounding*. The impact of cumulative depression leaves Bunyan at odds with himself, as far from a position of strength or power, or of conviction as he could be.

An overriding characteristic we see in Bunyan's writing here is timidity. Visited by a succession of temptations and berated internally by Satan, Bunyan approaches every episode with trepidation and the majority of *Grace Abounding* – in fact, the long central portion Sharrock identifies as being the conversion process – is a repetitive and rather cumbersome account of the author's turbulent mood swings. There is little, if any, spiritual advancement.

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<sup>161</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 72.

<sup>162</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 154.

Bunyan is hardly more assured of his salvation at the end of his spiritual autobiography than he is at its beginning.

There are times, for example, when Bunyan writes with the assurance of one whose salvation is definitively confirmed. I have illustrated the meandering fluctuation between hope and despair Bunyan experiences during the years he writes about in his autobiography and yet there are occasions when he appears so convinced of his elect status that spiritual slippage back into reprobation would seem unthinkable. This is as close to a soteriological grand narrative as Bunyan gets in *Grace Abounding* but, as I believe this passage illustrates, the doubtful little narrative immediately asserts itself and although is ostensibly quieted, the underlying differend remains:

Now did my chains fall off my Legs indeed, I was loosed from my affliction and irons, my temptations also fled away: so that from that time those dreadful Scriptures of God left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoycing, for the grace and love of God: So when I came home, I looked to see if I could find that Sentence, *Thy Righteousness is in Heaven*, but could not find such a Saying, wherefore my Heart began to sink again, onely that was brought to remembrance, *He of God is made unto us Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption*; by this word I saw the other Sentence true.<sup>163</sup>

The highly symbolic vision of chains falling off Bunyan's legs obviously brings to mind the burden that fell from Christian's back but the physical relief, the empirical truth, is tempered by the rising sense of panic that ensues in the wake of Bunyan being unable to cement his assurance by finding a particular scripture. Spiritual success is fleeting and a persistent conflict, or at least the possibility of its re-emergence, endures.

The frontispiece attached to the first edition of 1666 states that *Grace Abounding* shows how 'the Lord at length thorow Christ did deliver (Bunyan) from all the guilt and

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<sup>163</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 72.

terroure that lay upon him' and yet in the conclusion to the narrative, Bunyan is still unable to shed an acute sense of inner mistrust, 'I can do none of those things which God commands me, but my corruptions will thrust in themselves; When I would do good, evil is present with me'<sup>164</sup>. This does not sound like a writer confident of his salvation and it shows the kind of contradictory mentality that informs the majority of the text. The difficulty for Bunyan is that he lacks conviction in faith and more importantly, in his ability to resist temptation. Even after what appears to be sound evidence of grace – either as flashes of empowering scripture or deliverance from worldly dangers – Bunyan's conscience inevitably gnaws away at itself until despondency takes him over. Stachniewski correctly points to examples of 'euphoric experiences of triumphant certainty, but these are always at risk of retakes, subject to self-directed charges of subjectivism and to the evacuation of all spiritual sense'<sup>165</sup>, and it is this tempering of euphoria with internal doubt that prevents a single soteriological epiphany taking place.

What does happen during the course of Bunyan's spiritual awakening is that he becomes alive to the *possibility* of election. In this sense conversion, while neither a single event, nor even a convincing process, is perhaps an awakening to the criteria of salvation; as Roger Pooley says: 'Comforting feelings are not the final message of *Grace Abounding*; nor is spiritual assurance';<sup>166</sup> what we do find, by the end of *Grace Abounding*, is a depiction of a man now reconciled to the conflicted nature of predestinarian doctrine. Bunyan seems content to struggle with internal opposition for what would likely be an indefinite period of time. 'My Grace is sufficient', he says, 'if it were not for these three or four words, now how might I be comforted'. Bunyan has reached a state of incredulity with regard to his soteriological state, and there is a palpable sense of his condition being like that described by

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<sup>164</sup> *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>165</sup> John Stachniewski, *Grace Abounding and Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xix.

<sup>166</sup> Roger Pooley, 'Grace Abounding and the New Sense of the Self', p. 105.

Lyotard in *The Differend* where ‘One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy.’<sup>167</sup> Faced with such a conflict, Bunyan accepts a state of differend at the expense of a conversion experience.

Acceptance of such an irreconcilable conflict – of a differend – has a number of implications as to our reading of the dissenting nonconformist individual. How can a seemingly empirical state such as election have any legitimacy when the subject is never assured of his status, and never can be? The grand narrative of salvation begins to look increasingly fractured. Stuart Sim and David Walker correctly point to the collapse of authority in England during the seventeenth century as bringing about an environment ‘where the traditional narratives of church and state collapsed so dramatically in the 1640s, leaving a full-scale legitimisation crisis in their wake’<sup>168</sup>. This is a compelling observation and as a result, spiritual autobiography – a mode of writing designed to identify evidence of certainty with regards to salvation – would then rather become a tool that reflects this crisis.

## Conclusion

This chapter has questioned an assumption about *Grace Abounding*. When Michael Davies reads Bunyan’s conversion narrative as a ‘lucid process of salvation, charting the sinning believer’s journey from a guilt-ridden state of enslavement under the covenant of law and works... to the liberty offered by a covenant of grace’<sup>169</sup> he is adopting a supposition similarly applied by many readers: that Bunyan is, by the end of *Grace Abounding*, in a state of grace. This chapter has dissented from this view and posited that because Bunyan remains

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<sup>167</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xi.

<sup>168</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 11.

<sup>169</sup> Michael Davies, ‘Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners: John Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography’, in Anne Dunan-Page (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2010, pp. 73-74.

conflicted as to his soteriological fate, and because *Grace Abounding* was so influential and remains the exemplary model of the form, this crisis of legitimation raises implications for the genre as a whole – both in terms of structure and content – and for the literature that was to appear in its wake.

It is widely agreed that all autobiographical writing is necessarily selective in terms of what the writer chooses to include, or rather, what they leave out of their account of their past. The spiritual autobiography, obsessed as it is with soteriological advancement, usually excludes almost all material not pertaining to religious experience and this is particularly evident in *Grace Abounding* where, as Roger Sharrock notes, ‘(Bunyan’s) exclusions are of practically all the events and experiences which are usually thought to be of interest in a secular autobiography’.<sup>170</sup> If such an exclusionist text then fails to communicate its single purpose – to record conclusive evidence of the author’s election – to any real degree, then what exactly *does* it achieve?

After a period of illness, Bunyan slips into a particularly crushing bout of depression in which he removes himself from the elect and gives startling insight into the paradox of his situation:

At the apprehension of these things, my sickness was doubled upon me, for now was I sick in my inward man, my soul was clogged with guilt, now also was my former experience of Gods goodness to me quite taken out of my mind, and hid as if it had never been, nor seen: Now was my Soul greatly pinched between these two considerations. *Live I must, Die I dare not*<sup>171</sup>

It is as if bodily sickness has caused his spiritual degeneration. This episode illustrates the crisis at the heart of his spiritual life and is indicative of *Grace Abounding* as a whole. The cyclical, at times ponderously so, nature of the narrative reflects, perhaps unwittingly, the

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<sup>170</sup> Roger Sharrock, ‘Spiritual Autobiography: Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*’, p. 98.

<sup>171</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 80.

lack of conviction Bunyan has in his faith; because of the subjectivity and mono-dimensional structure of spiritual autobiography, that mode of writing aptly records these crises.

Despite Bunyan being unable to declare – in the way that fellow member of the Independent congregation of St. John’s and spiritual autobiographer Agnes Beaumont<sup>172</sup> feels able – that he is among the elect, he does insist (and his repetition of the adjective ‘comfort’ is notable) that he finds comfort in the following, rather bleak, passage from Psalm 44, ‘Thou sellest thy people for nought, and dost not increase *thy wealth* by their price’. He is resolved that his faith shall be strong, if not exactly constant, even though ‘I have nothing at all for my pains’. This resignation to uncertainty is proof surely of the failure of Bunyan’s soteriological grand narrative, proof of the impossibility of possessing absolute evidence of election. I would like to conclude this chapter by suggesting how this resignation, the acceptance of the differend, is the message Bunyan ultimately communicates to his readership at the expense of confirming grace.

There are two striking aspects of the opening section of *Grace Abounding* that impact heavily both upon the later narrative – and of course the conversion process – and upon the character Bunyan presents to the reader. They give an indication of the fragility of Bunyan’s psychology and hint strongly at the lack of internal authority that ultimately results in his spiritual uncertainty. Bunyan’s exacting account of the nature of his early reprobation gives insight into the internalised, self-destructive psychology that he continually refers to as ‘temptation’ during the course of his narrative. The beginnings of what would become a cyclical pattern of hope and despair take root here. Conversely, Bunyan also gives a number of examples of him being miraculously delivered from all manner of earthly dangers that suggests a glimmer of grace even during his most godless years. This paradoxical opening, adhering as it does to the conventional stylistic pattern of the spiritual autobiography,

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<sup>172</sup> For a full account of Beaumont’s spiritual autobiography, see chapter 2 of this thesis.



illustrates the extreme mania and depression Bunyan is to experience throughout his life and introduces the internalised conflict and doubt that characterise Bunyan's spiritual autobiography.

*Grace Abounding* opens, in the manner of most conversion narratives, with an account of Bunyan's childhood and a suggestion as to the social status of his family. Bunyan's assertion that his family home was 'of that rank that is meanest, and most despised of all families in the Land' is obviously designed to contextualise the impoverished (and the connotations are that his impoverishment was spiritual as well as economical) upbringing overcome by the writer for his audience. It must be pointed out, however, that the Bunyans were once reasonably affluent smallholders and had only recently declined to the point that Thomas Bunyan, the author's father, worked as a tinker – a profession his son was to similarly adopt. It is also worth noting that a term like 'meanest' had, in the seventeenth century, a number of connotations that might mislead the modern reader. As Keeble notes, 'Bunyan's own church was described as of the "Meanest sort". That this phrase was Bunyan's own description of his family's social status in *Grace Abounding* suggests, however, that 'mean' and 'inferior' denote not the very poorest but mechanics like Bunyan, artisans, and husbandmen.'<sup>173</sup> That said however, Bunyan is at pains to communicate just how low his social and spiritual condition was during his earliest years. As well as dwelling upon what he insists was an impoverished background, Bunyan records evidence of his generally reprobate behaviour in a didactic tone that is pitched directly at his nonconformist readers:

I had but few Equals, (especially considering my tears, which were tender, being few) both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup>N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 142.

<sup>174</sup>*Grace Abounding*, p. 6.

This behaviour is, for the pre-conversion Bunyan, a reflection of his natural state – as he puts it, ‘cursing and swearing, and playing the Mad-man, after my wonted manner’ – one that he is born into and the first real indication of the Calvinist doctrine that later dominates his religious life. Despite these apparently inherent character flaws, Bunyan is to some extent critical of his father (a figure Bunyan only references in relation to his religious shortcomings) whom he sees as the cause of at least some of his reprobate tendencies. He certainly blames his father for the manner of his speech for which he is soundly reprimanded by a neighbour who was ‘made to tremble to hear me’. This chastisement leads Bunyan to declaim:

I wished with all my heart that I might be a little childe again, that my Father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing: for, thought I, I am so accustomed to it, that it is but in vain for me to think of a reformation, for I thought it could never be.<sup>175</sup>

There is irreconcilability in this despair and although Bunyan is suggesting external influences as being the cause of his ‘wicked way’, the temptations that immediately follow this deep remorse, and which he acts upon, are undeniably of his own construction, ‘I did still let loose the reigns to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the Law of God’.<sup>176</sup> At this stage of course, Bunyan is not aware of the possibility of salvation – or of damnation for that matter – and easily reverts to his natural godless state. He underlines the absolute nature of his reprobation by portraying himself as something of an atheist:

In these days, the thoughts of Religion was very grievous to me; I could neither endure it myself, nor that any other should.

Heaven and Hell were both out of sight and minde; and as for Saving and Damning, they were least in my thoughts.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 12.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

These sentiments are of course literary devices designed to impress prospective saints but they go some way towards showing how Bunyan saw his life before conversion. I would agree with Hill to a certain extent when he contends that,

Bunyan's account of his own desperate wickedness is no doubt exaggerated with the hindsight of conversion. But the scraps of conversation which he records ring true. He went through phases of conventional piety which failed to satisfy him, and experienced long periods of 'a very great storm', in which his internal dialogue with Satan continued that with his former Ranter friends.<sup>178</sup>

I think that, rather than possessing the, 'hindsight of conversion', Bunyan's exaggeration of the reprobate state in which he lives at the beginning of his life – perhaps the only period of emotional and spiritual certainty he ever actually experiences – is more an acute reflection on the state into which he is fearful of degenerating. The language with which Bunyan describes the physical manifestation of this spiritual turmoil (he is plagued by nightmares and waking visions) emphasises his internal conflict, that of his desire to be elect and his compulsion to commit sinful acts. The dichotomy is insurmountable and is an exemplary illustration of a differend:

[God] did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrifie me with dreadful visions. For often, after I have been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of devils.

*Grace Abounding* shows Bunyan to be aware of the possibility of salvation. He experiences moments of spiritual clarity that lure the reader, and Bunyan himself, into thinking elect status has been confirmed. There are extended periods of hope during which Bunyan exists in a state approaching grace and yet the regularity of his 'castings down', the continual gnawing away of the soteriological grand narrative by the little narratives of self-

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<sup>178</sup>Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, pp. 58-59.

destructive doubt leave him in a position of uncertainty. Michael Davies has written recently about the ‘difficult labyrinths of conversion’ in *Grace Abounding*, something he sees as being an important instructional device for the prospective saint:

[W]e can begin to see how and why it is so important for *Grace Abounding* to remain labyrinthine and seemingly repetitive as an account of conversion. On the one hand, faith in grace is something to be maintained continually for Bunyan through perseverance, with all its ups-and-downs. On the other, what *Grace Abounding* depicts are the stages through which the convert may have to pass to realise true faith, a process which naturally encompasses movements both forwards and backwards, through faith and despair and back again: all those ‘*castings down, and raisings up*’.<sup>179</sup>

The assumption that Bunyan realises ‘true faith’ is refuted by his comments at the end of *Grace Abounding* when he declares that the ‘inclinations to unbelief’ he continually experiences, ‘convince me of the insufficiencie of all inherent righteousness’<sup>180</sup>. Bunyan is unable to pass through the labyrinth described in his spiritual autobiography, he remains inside it. *Grace Abounding* shows Bunyan to be in conflict, as I have shown, with every aspect of his spiritual and psychological self and he never emerges from that conflict convincingly. The dissent apparent in his spiritual autobiography is very much internal: he is dissenting from his own spiritual assumptions.

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<sup>179</sup> Michael Davies, ‘Grace Abounding to the Chief of sinners: John Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography’, in Anne Dunan-Page (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2010, p. 74.

<sup>180</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 103.

## Chapter Two

### ‘Very much in prayre with god’: Crisis, Dissent, and *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*

#### Introduction

The previous chapter challenged assumptions regarding the soteriological standing of John Bunyan by the conclusion of his spiritual autobiography. I’ll turn now to Agnes Beaumont, a contemporary of Bunyan and a fellow member of the Baptist congregation at which Bunyan ministered, whose own conversion narrative dissents somewhat from the stylistic mode exemplified in *Grace Abounding* and who employed the spiritual autobiographical genre to present her own extraordinary experiences of persecution in a rural nonconformist community. It will become evident that Beaumont represents an effective little narrative sceptical of and reacting to spiritual and secular authority, who communicates this dissent by means of an established literary device.

Written in 1676, *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont* is an autobiographical account of a particularly difficult series of events involving the eponymous author during her twenty-second year. As an example of the nonconformist puritan conversion narrative, the text is lacking in many of the conventions of that literary form (as discussed in the introduction) – ‘Neither fiction nor conduct book nor conversion narrative’<sup>181</sup> – and often deviates from the familiar structural, thematic and aesthetic pattern of the traditional spiritual autobiography, a pattern propounded, ostensibly at least, by John Bunyan in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Despite the divergent nature of Beaumont’s

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<sup>181</sup> Vera Camden, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 14.

narrative when compared to classic spiritual autobiography, her text is still recognisably of that puritan tradition – it is a record of an individual's spiritual awakening and a document of their overcoming of adversity, both religious and secular.

This chapter examines the stylistic and structural differences and proposes that these innovations are illustrative of a wider mood of dissent evident in Beaumont's work; that she employed the mechanics of autobiographical writing to record the secular as well as spiritual events in her life. Although Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* depicts successfully his immediate environment and records the dialogues he enters into with members of that society with something approaching realism, Beaumont's *Narrative* draws attention to very specific events and does so in an extraordinarily immediate way. By emphasising Beaumont's conception of an autobiography as a means of recording subjective domestic experience – this in itself a rather bold exercise in 1676 – the chapter will go on to explore the nature of the dialogue Agnes Beaumont enters into with God in her *Narrative*. I will show how rather than employing the reverential and, more often than not, paranoid language common in comparable contemporary spiritual autobiographies, Beaumont's prose style is suggestive of a conspiratorial partnership that strengthens her position of dissent within her domestic situation and in the wider religious community. This will illustrate both the necessity and success of Beaumont's position of dissent from *within* the nonconformist sectarian world; I will show the diverse potential of this form of writing, how the basic conventions could be manipulated by the work of dissenters like Beaumont, and suggest that spiritual autobiography was capable of being a tool of empowerment for articulate individuals from the nonconformist sects who refused to stay silent.

## Beaumont in Context

The picture the twenty-two year old Beaumont paints of her rural existence is often one of domestic servitude; understandable and hardly surprising given her circumstances. This passage might best give an indication of Beaumont's day-to-day experiences:

So in the evening, my father said, "it is a very cold night; we will not sit up too long tonight." He, when the nights were long, would sit up with me a candle's burning, as I have sat at spinning or at other work. But then he said he would have his supper and go to bed because it was so cold.

So after supper, as he sat by the fire, he took a pipe of tobacco. And when he had done, he bade me take up the coals and warm his bed.<sup>182</sup>

The insight into everyday life in rural early modern England this affords is perhaps the reason for the endurance of Beaumont's writing. As a spiritual autobiography, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont* is successful in capturing the essential nature of religion for ostracised members of nonconformist communities – the strength religious conversion and the certainty of salvation brought to the most socially impoverished – but it also manages to convey the difficulties in domestic life that faced young women in the aftermath of the Restoration

Beaumont's dissent is made all the more affecting because she is so unassuming, although fiercely independent, so divorced from the sensationalism that surrounded other female nonconformists like Sara Davy or Anna Trapnell both of whom I shall allude to below. Her internalized nonconformity – private dissent in other words – neither upholds the clichéd image of the early modern woman suffering in silence, nor does it fly in the face of that generalisation. As Camden writes:

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<sup>182</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *Narrative*, p. 63.

Agnes's solitary existence in a farm house, an existence which might otherwise deaden both identity and aspiration, is enriched by hours of prayer. She has learned from her pastor how to make God the companion of her days.<sup>183</sup>

Despite this though, Beaumont's literary reputation has until recently been marginalised by studies of her contemporaries and much of the work that has cited Beaumont is dismissive and often derogatory. The tone of Christopher Hill's comments regarding Beaumont's reputation bear out this assessment and are worth quoting at length:

Bunyan's name was associated with [Beaumont's] in local gossip, apparently without any cause, at least on his side. Agnes may have had a crush on her pastor. She offended against the stern requirements of female subordination by going to hear Bunyan Preach, with only the most grudging permission from her father. When her arrangements for getting to the meeting broke down, Bunyan refused to give her a lift on his horse until her brother had mediated strongly on her behalf. Bunyan no doubt knew of the father's attitude, but in his absence the brother was the man responsible for her. Agnes Beaumont's father was furious, but was too late to stop her. He shut her out of house when she came home late at night. Four days later he inconveniently died, and Agnes was accused of murdering him. It seemed a natural consequence of her insubordination; she was lucky to be acquitted<sup>184</sup>.

Aside from the annoying insistence of referring to Beaumont as 'Agnes' – would we ever refer to Bunyan as 'John'? – the choice of language portrays Beaumont as being little more than a distraction to her pastor and does so in a particularly casual manner that ignores the eloquence, and maturity, with which she narrates her autobiography and the dangerous position that befell her in the aftermath of her father's death.

Recent interest in female writing from early modern England has seen a limited critical re-evaluation of Beaumont and has produced a small amount of important work on a writer who has traditionally been seen as little more than an addendum to studies of John Bunyan. This is of course due to the infamous episode mentioned above (although it would

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<sup>183</sup> Vera Camden, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 15.

<sup>184</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 301.



be more accurate to say that the rumours surrounding the incident were far more interesting than the event itself) that led to her being estranged from her father. The notoriety of Bunyan's involvement in Beaumont's narrative is not a recent phenomenon and the note prefaced to the original manuscript, that was not published until 1760, draws the reader's attention to this most sensational episode and, most likely as an incentive to interested parties, plays up his role in the action:

Written by one Agnes (Beaumont) of Edworth, Beds. intimately acquainted with John Bunyan, and to whose meetings she went contrary to her father's wishes, he objecting to his daughter attending such. She mentions his name in several parts of the MS.<sup>185</sup>

What follows, disappointingly, makes no further reference to any lurid scandal hinted at by the clause, 'intimately acquainted with', and yet this editorial suggestion and the implications it levelled at the literary embodiment of Puritanism has probably ensured the survival of Beaumont's name in the histories of seventeenth-century England, if only as a footnote. Bunyan himself strenuously denied these and other salacious allegations in later editions of *Grace Abounding*, where he writes:

I also calling all those fools, or knaves, that have thus made it anything of their business to affirm any of the things aforenamed of me, namely, that I have been naught with other Women, or the like, when they have used to the utmost of their endeavours, and made the fullest enquiry that they can, to prove against me truly, that there is any woman in Heaven, or Earth, or Hell, that can say, I have at any time, in any place, by day or night, so much as attempted to be naught with them; and speak I thus, to beg mine Enemies into a good esteem of me? No, not I. I will in this beg relief of no man: believe, or disbelieve me in this, all is a case to me.<sup>186</sup>

The outburst can only have fuelled the rumours and this angry denial is glossed brilliantly by Richard L. Greaves who imagines, 'Bunyan, his face flushed, heatedly denying that he had

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<sup>185</sup> *Narrative*, p. 36.

<sup>186</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, p. 94. All further quotations are from this edition.

mistresses and illegitimate children... The severity of his reaction was partly the consequence of the not unnatural attraction he felt toward women, undoubtedly those who, like Agnes Beaumont, were awed by his ministerial prowess.’<sup>187</sup> Again though, Greaves draws attention to the naivety of Beaumont’s relationship with Bunyan, reinforcing the received assumptions about her character and the marginal status of her text.

Of the recent studies that do contribute to our understanding of Beaumont, a few stand out as being of interest to literary and historical readers. Patricia Bell’s ‘Agnes Beaumont of Edworth’<sup>188</sup>, for example, concentrates upon the years following the trial, and her research into the cast of characters involved, who at times resemble the character types seen in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, enriches our understanding of Beaumont’s narrative. Bell’s is an historical investigation though, and she makes no study of Beaumont’s writing; Beaumont is a figure of *historical* interest as she points out: ‘Today there is increasing interest in Agnes Beaumont herself because of the current concern with the life of women in the past, and the scarcity of autobiographical work by seventeenth century women.’<sup>189</sup> Beaumont’s undeniable importance as a sectarian woman aside, the purpose of this study is to examine her literary merits and her unique place in the history of nonconformist writing.

Vera Camden’s insightful introduction to her edition of the *Narrative* contextualises Beaumont in the Independent congregational world in and around Bedford. She outlines the importance of this text, pointing to Beaumont’s extraordinary position as a dissenting woman:

What is remarkable about Beaumont is that, though a woman, she followed Bunyan’s model: she silenced her persecutors in a community courtroom rather than lapse into the exemplary silence of the woman and she recorded her triumph for the saints... She does not apologize for writing or for being a poor ignorant woman in the manner

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<sup>187</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 311.

<sup>188</sup> Patricia L. Bell, ‘Agnes Beaumont of Edworth,’ *Bunyan Studies*, 10 (2001/ 2002), pp. 7-28.

<sup>189</sup> *ibid*, p 7.

which virtually defines women's autobiographical writing well into the eighteenth century and beyond.<sup>190</sup>

Camden's introduction is at pains to show the importance of Beaumont as a remarkable and somewhat unique figure of dissent rather than portraying her as a minor player in the story of nonconformist history. Her importance to Bunyan, certainly, should not be underestimated given that he felt obliged to amend his own spiritual autobiography as a result of his involvement with her and at the very least his actions confirm what Beaumont alludes to in the *Narrative*, that her domestic marginalization is as much an imposed grand narrative, one to be treated with incredulity to borrow a phrase from Lyotard<sup>191</sup>, as evidence of election was to her pastor.

Tamsin Spargo has raised a similar point and has suggested that Beaumont's writing presents an effective threat to the 'balance of patriarchal power relations',<sup>192</sup> illustrated in this particular domestic instance by Bunyan and her own father upon whom she is financially dependent. Spargo reiterates this position and makes a claim for the power of Beaumont's writing as a means of communicating this dissent through her spiritual autobiography:

Claiming the position of a writer, she presents a text which both exposes the tensions and contradictions within such power relations and stands as a contra-diction, a woman's text which tests the limits of textual and discursive strategies of exclusion. By the end of the text both fathers have been effectively silenced; it is the daughter's, the woman's turn.<sup>193</sup>

This emphasis upon Beaumont the writer, rather than consolidating her status as a marginal footnote, acknowledges the importance of her text not only as an example of spiritual

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<sup>190</sup> Vera Camden, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 13.

<sup>191</sup> See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives.'

<sup>192</sup> Tamsin Spargo, 'Contra-dictions: Women as Figures of Exclusion and Resistance in John Bunyan and Agnes Beaumont's Narratives', in Kate Chedzoy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill (eds.), *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing* (Keele: Keele University Press) p. 182.

<sup>193</sup> Tamsin Spargo, 'Contra-dictions', p. 182.

autobiography, but as a record of an individual's experience from within the nonconformist community and goes some way towards demonstrating how effective the spiritual autobiography could be at presenting the voice of a dissenting little narrative.

Beaumont's writing occasionally resembles the fiction of Daniel Defoe – in some respects, her narrative is more a precursor of the novel than the more celebrated writing of John Bunyan – in its depiction of first-person experience and dramatic pacing, for example:

So I came home ploshing through the durt, over shoes having no pattings on. I made what haste I could, hoping I should be at home before my father was a bed; but when I came neer the house, I see no light in it. So I went to the door, and found it Lockt, with the key in it. Then my heart began to Ake with fear; for if I have not been at home, he would Cary the key to bed with him, and give me it out at Window. But now I perceived what I was Like to trust to; but how ever, I went to his Chamber window, and Called to him.<sup>194</sup>

The preceding quotation is typical of Beaumont's writing and certainly reads like a piece of literary fiction. This short episode describes in detail and with mounting tension, the journey home our heroine experiences and her dread at the possibility of angering her father due to her late arrival. The use of descriptive onomatopoeia such as 'ploshing' creates an immediacy and natural realism for the reader, whilst the shortened clauses heighten the sense of rising panic as she approaches her father's house. These techniques were yet to take on the familiarity, almost to the point of cliché, that they were to do by the mid-eighteenth century and there are certainly few examples of this kind of assured prose style in other spiritual autobiographies. To illustrate this point further, compare the preceding quotation with this passage from Defoe's novel, *Roxana*:

I cry'd out for Help; but it had been all one, to have cry'd out on the top of a Mountain, where no-body had been within five Miles of me; for the the Seamen were so engag'd, and made so much Noise, that no-body heard me, or came near me; I open'd the Great-Cabbin Door, and look'd into the Steerage, to cry for Help, but

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<sup>194</sup> *Narrative*, p. 199.

there, to increase my Fright, was two Seamen on their Knees, at Prayers, and only one Man who steer'd, and he made a groaning Noise too...<sup>195</sup>

Similarly, early examples of the novel favoured an epistolary form that dispensed with any kind of omniscient narrator resulting in immediate, extremely subjective feigned histories.

Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* both follow this pattern (in many ways laying the foundations for the genre) and also record events in the lives of young heroines, usually having to overcome some trial or adversary. For example:

I then assured him that it was with infinite concern, that I had found myself drawn into an epistolary correspondence with him; especially since that correspondence had been prohibited – And the only agreeable use I could think of making of this unexpected and undesired interview was to let him know that I should from henceforth think myself obliged to discontinue it. And I hoped that he would not have the *thought* of engaging me to carry it on, by menacing my relations.<sup>196</sup>

This kind of writing – fictionalized autobiography – has its roots in the tradition of the conversion narrative but what is particularly striking in this instance is the similarity of tone between Richardson's famous eighteenth-century novel, and the truly marginalised, all but forgotten, narrative of Agnes Beaumont. The fact that those early novels by Richardson began as instructional tools for young ladies embarking on careers as letter-writers, only serves to highlight the debt in lineage novel writers owed to spiritual autobiographies. That they borrowed from them stylistically can be evidenced from their content.

There are numerous studies connecting the allegorical prose fiction of John Bunyan with the burgeoning novel<sup>197</sup>. Defoe's earlier *Robinson Crusoe* famously borrows from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and is itself something of a spiritual autobiography, but in Beaumont's

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<sup>195</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*, ed. David Blewett (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1987, p. 163.

<sup>196</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 2004, p. 170.

<sup>197</sup> See for example, G. A. Starr's *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, and Stuart Sim's later *Negotiations with Paradox*.

prose style, we have a particularly arresting prefiguring of the prose fiction of the eighteenth century.

Richard Norwood's *Confessions*, written just before the outbreak of Civil War and so pre-dating Beaumont's narrative by almost thirty five years, is by contrast a markedly episodic text that, whilst retaining the sense of spirituality and the drama of the puritan journey to salvation, never really moves beyond the stylistic pattern of religious diary. Norwood's writing is loftier and often appears to aspire to Biblical pretensions, making the text seem rather archaic when read alongside Beaumont's relaxed, recognisably conversational style.

But surely they were only fleeting perswasions, and I did not well understand from what to convert, nor to what, nor could distinctly discern what pyety was but only in a general and very confused and uncertain manner. Neither was it doubtless at best any more then moral, being without any spark of the right knowledge and apprehension of Christ, that I can remember. Yet surely very profitable for me, and a means through the grace of God to preserve me for many years from falling into such gross sins as else I should have fallen into.<sup>198</sup>

Again we must consider the spiritual position from which these texts were composed.

Beaumont's assured style must be informed by her stated knowledge of election. Her text does not hinge upon the conversion experience – and all the fear and doubt that comes with it – but rather is a record of how salvation can lead to the overcoming of various secular trials. Norwood's writing, like Bunyan's, reflects the uncertainty at the heart of his faith; Beaumont's, her surety of election. Compare the passage quoted above with this extract from Beaumont:

In those days I was Always laying up many a prayre in heaven Against I came to the Lords Table, Where I often found a very plentiful return. I could say a great deal

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<sup>198</sup> *Narrative*, p. 127.

more what I have met with, and how I have been in that Ordinance, But I shall for bear.<sup>199</sup>

In a genre where the slightest sign of god's grace is seized upon and 'plentiful returns' desperately sought amongst endless doubt and despair, it is particularly jarring to find a writer not wanting to burden the reader with too many examples of prayers being answered. In this respect, Beaumont's narrative sits rather uneasily alongside classic spiritual autobiography like *Grace Abounding* and yet Beaumont was clearly in awe of her pastor and would surely have read or at least heard other accounts of spiritual conversion narratives. Why then is her text so stylistically different to those models?

Many factors differentiate Beaumont from other writers of spiritual autobiographies. Apart from the comfort she draws from her feelings concerning her elect status mentioned above, there are a number of more mundane elements that might have had important implications for her narrative. For one thing, she is a young, unmarried woman from a 'middling' sort of background.<sup>200</sup> Her age, sex, and social class cannot be over-emphasised considering the political period in which she was writing. These factors go some way to informing the thematic content of Beaumont's work: the fact that she is female, unmarried, and financially dependent upon her father places her in a very different environment from that of Abiezer Coppe, and especially someone like Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle whose *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life* shares little with Beaumont's text in the way of world view or societal experience. Having said that, Cavendish's autobiographical writing does mirror some aspects of Beaumont's *stylistic*

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>200</sup> In her important, 'Agnes Beaumont of Edworth' (*Bunyan Studies* 10), Patricia L. Bell gives a full description of the Beaumont's family position, '... and the father, by then about 70 years of age, seems to have already handed over the main part of the leasehold to his eldest son... If he had arable, we may assume that it was worked for him by his son's labourers, who certainly thought of him as 'their Old master.' P. 8. From this we can assume John Beaumont was, if not wealthy, then in a fairly comfortable financial position.

method in that she gives a fully rounded appraisal of her social circle, documenting the world beyond her inner spiritual concerns. Male writers of spiritual autobiography tend to use pastoral description as a means of furthering their soteriological growth (see, for example, Bunyan's encounter with the 'three or four poor women' in *Grace Abounding* who are little more than symbols of the author's fluctuating psychological state) whereas in these examples of female writing, the emphasis reverts to a wider, less allegorical, more secular context. For example,

Besides, I had heard the world was apt to lay aspersions even on the innocent, for which I durst neither look up with my eyes, nor speak, nor be any way sociable: insomuch as I was thought a natural fool. Indeed I had not much wit, yet I was not an idiot; my wit was according to my years.<sup>201</sup>

The stylistic qualities displayed in her text will form a large body of the discussion in this chapter but it is worth underlining at the outset that Beaumont's mode of writing is as much an act of dissent as the situations it communicates; her writing, perhaps out of necessity given her education and background, is a lucid and unadorned document that captures the lives of working men and women in a way that few if any other contemporary spiritual texts do at such a personal level. Beaumont's familiarity with the world about which she writes makes her narrative a vital history of dissenting nonconformity during the English Revolution. Camden, Spargo, and Bell draw attention to the importance of domestic dissent in Beaumont's narrative and this is something I shall explore further here by examining how this sort of domestic reportage deviates from the model of spiritual autobiography that I examined in the Introduction. Close reading of the themes pertaining to classic spiritual

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<sup>201</sup> Margaret Cavendish, from *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life*, in Graham, Elspeth, et al (eds) *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-century Englishwomen* (London: Routledge) 1989, p. 90.



autobiography alongside Beaumont's dissension will underline her importance as the recorder of a social group marginalised even within the nonconformist community.

During the course of this chapter I shall again draw upon Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern philosophy (in particular his theory of the differend) in order to situate Beaumont's predicament within the wider socio-political climate of mid-seventeenth century England. Beaumont will be seen to represent the kind of little narrative that undermines the grand narrative represented by authority in the form of the courts, the community that accuses her of murder, and the nonconformist church represented in this instance by the figure of John Bunyan, whose aspirations toward religious authority were found to be similarly undermined in the previous chapter.

### **Stylistic and Structural Dissent**

John Stachniewski suggests that Beaumont's narrative is 'very different from the spiritual autobiographies of all sectarian colours. Rather than a spiritual history, it is a vivid snapshot of the most traumatic passage of a young woman's life.'<sup>202</sup> Whereas the conventional spiritual autobiography might be expected to relate in episodic detail – often pedantically so – the gradual emergence of the author's confirmation of election, Beaumont's narrative is more a record of how that certainty of salvation, something established very early in the text, is drawn upon when the author is faced with a series of secular crises. The *Narrative* opens with the following declaration of spiritual assurance:

The Lord hath been pleased, since I was awakened, to exercise me with many and great trials; but, blessed be his gracious name, he hath caused all to work together for good to my poor soul, and hath often given me cause to say it was good for me that I

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<sup>202</sup> John Stachniewski, 'Introduction', *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xxxix.

have been afflicted. And oh, how great hath the kindness of God been to me in afflicting dispensations!<sup>203</sup>

Beaumont's opening sentence establishes in an extraordinarily forthright way a sense of stylistic dissent from the established tradition of the spiritual autobiography; essentially she renders the general pattern of Puritan autobiography obsolete. By situating herself clearly in a state of post-conversion grace, she has no need to present the lengthy stages of early providence, unregenerative life, and resistance to the Gospel that Bunyan does in *Grace Abounding*. These stages are, for Bunyan at least, a means of establishing the extent of his reprobate pedigree as a model for prospective saints, and Richard L. Greaves has proposed similarly three reasons for Bunyan's inclusion of this sustained account of his unregenerate life:

... to establish himself as a truly great sinner who, like Paul, was converted to preach the gospel; to persuade others who doubted or struggled that they too could persevere; and to reassure himself, as he wrote in prison, that the cause for which he had been incarcerated was indeed just.<sup>204</sup>

That Beaumont refutes the need to reassure or persuade her readership or herself of her soteriological state – showing rather than telling – confirms Spargo's assertion that Beaumont 'invites the reader to make judgements about [her] situation on the basis of her textual evidence'.<sup>205</sup> Bunyan of course asks something similar of the reader but is far more persuasive and far less impartial, needing to convince himself, as I highlighted in the previous chapter, as well as his audience of his state of grace.

The *Narrative* assumes a position of election and illustrates that assurance with a series of vignettes that show the impact soteriological evidence has on the domestic crises

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<sup>203</sup> *Narrative*, p. 37.

<sup>204</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 61.

<sup>205</sup> Tamsin Spargo, 'Contra-dictions', p. 182.

Beaumont faces. This is the major stylistic difference between Beaumont's text and *Grace Abounding* and is illustrated well in the aftermath of the altercation Beaumont enters into with her father after returning home late from the Church meeting. Her father refuses to allow her into the house and she decides to spend the night in the barn, refusing, again with an air of dissent, to stay instead with her brother:

“No,” said I, “I will go, and cry to heaven for mercy for my soul, and for some new discoveries of the love of Christ.” But these and many frightful thoughts came into my mind, as this, how did I know but I might be knocked on the head in the barn before morning; or if not so, I might catch my death by the cold.<sup>206</sup>

Bunyan is in constant fear of dying before finding evidence of God's grace; Beaumont is concerned here only with her immediate mortal state and the possibility of finding 'new discoveries of the love of Christ'. Her resolve is strengthened further by faith and, as she writes, 'one scripture after another came into my mind to encourage me in that work'.<sup>207</sup> The episode reinforces Beaumont's state of grace and unlike Bunyan whose spirituality is on a permanent knife-edge and whose psychological state fluctuates between periods of hope and extreme despair, her faith is resolute in spite of perceived temptation:

So into the barn I went, and it was a very dark night; and when I came into the barn, I found I was again assaulted by Satan, but having received some strength from God and his word, as I remember I spoke out with these and such like words; “Satan, my father hath thee in a chain; thou canst not hurt me.”<sup>208</sup>

By emerging relatively unscathed from her trials in the barn, Beaumont's little dissent – that of attending the meeting despite multi-faceted patriarchal intervention – is complete.

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<sup>206</sup> *Narrative*, p. 47.

<sup>207</sup> *Narrative*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>208</sup> *ibid*, p. 48.

The overriding structural difference evident in Beaumont's *Narrative* is its chronological scope. Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* records the narrator's spiritual state from childhood through to about 1660, a period of approximately thirty years. Although Bunyan scrutinizes in particular the years between his demobilization from the army in 1644 and the period of spiritual crisis during the 1650s, his narrative presents a full account of his soteriological standing. Laurence Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found* similarly documents the events that impacted upon the author's spiritual life over a number of years and Richard Norwood's *Confessions*, although charting the author's geographical circumstances as much as his spiritual state, covers a period of several years. Beaumont's *Narrative* is by contrast concerned with a single event – or at least a set of closely related circumstances – that extend over a period of no more than a few days.<sup>209</sup> The text is, as a result, more of an illustration of God's grace towards her, and the writing is concerned for the most part more with domestic intervention than internal soul-searching:

So when I was ready, I went to my brother's, expecting to meet with Mr. Wilson to ride behind him. And there I waited some time; and nobody came. At last my heart began to ache, and I fell a crying for fear I should not go, for my brother told me he could not let me have a horse to go for they was all at work, and he was to carry my sister behind him to the meeting, so that he could in no ways help me thither. And it was the deep of winter, I could not go on foot.<sup>210</sup>

This passage illustrates the patriarchal system upon which Beaumont's attendance at the Church meeting depends. The importance she attaches to such meetings is emphasised by the lengths to which she goes to get there and her relationship with her father hinges upon his permission to allow her to attend. 'And in those days it was like death to me to be kept from such a meeting'<sup>211</sup> she writes and it is clear that her membership of the Church at Gamlinghay

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<sup>209</sup> 'The narrative of her 'singular experience' is brief but dramatic. The events took place in the spring of 1674 in little more than a week.' Patricia L. Bell, 'Agnes Beaumont of Edworth', p. 8.

<sup>210</sup> *Narrative*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>211</sup> *Narrative*, p. 41.

provides an essential outlet, both tangible and spiritual, from her otherwise isolated existence in her father's house; the threat of her not being able to go is the cause of what I see as her 'casual dissent' in the face of a quite rigid, paternal authority.

Bunyan's initial refusal to allow Beaumont to ride with him to the meeting has been read as him defending himself against his own carnal desire. Greaves writes that Bunyan 'must have known what feelings, however unwanted, would well up within him as they rode for seven miles, her body rubbing against his, her hands clasped tightly around his waist'<sup>212</sup> but Beaumont records Bunyan as saying "'If I should carry you, your father would be grievous angry with me'".<sup>213</sup> Whilst not denying the possibility of Bunyan's sexual attraction to the 'attractive, dramatic, articulate'<sup>214</sup> young woman, I suggest that the reason Beaumont quotes serves her narrative better in that it demonstrates her ability to dissent from the wishes of her father. Her response to Bunyan – 'If you please to carry me, I will venture that' – and the joy of her countenance as they set out on the journey suggest this episode is the latest in a series of domestic conflicts in which Beaumont has engaged:

But to speak the truth I had not gone far behind him, but my heart was puffed up with pride, and I began to have high thoughts of myself, and proud to think I should ride behind such a man as he was; and I was pleased that anybody did look after me as I rode along. And sometimes he would be speaking to me about the things of God as we went along. And indeed I thought myself a happy body that day.<sup>215</sup>

She is obviously in awe of her pastor, and the breathlessness of her prose highlights the excitement of being seen with him, but then Bunyan was similarly awed after his exposure to the poor women in *Grace Abounding*. I would argue that her pride is symptomatic of a sense of triumph over paternal barriers represented by dependency on her father, brother, and

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<sup>212</sup> Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 312.

<sup>213</sup> *Narrative*, p. 43.

<sup>214</sup> Camden, 'Introduction', p. 17.

<sup>215</sup> *Narrative*, p. 44.

pastor. This ‘casual dissent’ should be read as a successful example of a little narrative resisting the authoritarian patriarchal grand narrative. Its effects are both limited and short-term but the fact remains that Beaumont refuses to bow to the claims to authority these figures represent and is able to enjoy her Church meeting.

Beaumont uses her *Narrative* to record evidence of her dissent as much as she does to find evidence of God’s grace. Her use of the spiritual autobiography is in itself a form of dissent in the way it confounds the structural and stylistic assumptions associated with the genre and yet her *Narrative* still manages to be part of the conversion narrative tradition. When the text finally saw publication in 1760 – almost a hundred years after it was written – it was collected with other writings in a volume entitled, *An Abstract of the Gracious Dealings of God with Several Eminent Christians in their Conversions and Sufferings*<sup>216</sup> and even today the most easily available edition is that in *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*<sup>217</sup>. Beaumont’s legacy, although dominated by her relationship with John Bunyan, is still as the writer of a spiritual autobiography.

### **Beaumont’s Prophetic Dreams and her Conspiracy with God**

Central to Beaumont’s writing are her apparent visionary traits that she refers to as ‘dreams’. She describes dreams in vivid detail in which god either appears or else shows her some cryptic suggestion of the future. While not exactly part of the visionary tradition in the sense we might describe her contemporary Anna Trapnel, Beaumont does consider these dreams to be worthy enough for inclusion in an autobiography that otherwise seems to omit a great deal of biographical material not related directly to the events surrounding her trial. I’ll turn now to aspects of Beaumont’s narrative that share some qualities with people like Trapnel and yet

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<sup>216</sup> Ed. Samuel James, M. A. Ninth edition, ed. Isaac James (Bristol and London) 1824.

<sup>217</sup> Ed. John Stachniewski with Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1998.

remain as internal aspects of her dissenting self rather than the kind of performances perpetrated by others.

It is interesting to note that Beaumont mentions an early episode in which her father fears for his daughter's mental well-being, declaiming that '*I thinck my daughter will be distracted*'<sup>218</sup>. His worries that her strong sense of faith might be having a negative effect upon her mental health is suggestive of fears that his daughter may be displaying signs of mysticism, something that stirred a popular sensationalism in a world hungry for scandal and lent a certain notoriety to those involved in it. The passage in full shows Beaumont had displayed worrying physical as well as mental symptoms:

For when I was first awakened, (her father) was mightily Concernd, seeing me in such distress about my soul, and would say to some neighbours that Came some times to the house; said he, *I thinck my daughter will be distracted, She scarce Eats, drincks, or sleeps; and I have lived these three score years and scarce ever thought of my Soul.*<sup>219</sup>

Although this is an offhand remark that Beaumont does not reiterate, it could be construed that her father's oft-stated dislike of her attending the meetings at Gamlinghay was, rather than a display of paternal muscle, an attempt to protect his daughter from the damaging fallout of any possible outbursts of mysticism. (For a discussion of the treatment meted out to Anna Trapnel who did succumb to mysticism, see also chapter 4). If John Beaumont regarded his daughter as being susceptible to extreme manifestations of Puritanism, then contact with pastors like Bunyan in such close quarters (not to mention accepting a ride on the back of his horse!) would surely have filled him with dread and it is entirely understandable why he reacts with such fury to her disobeying him.

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<sup>218</sup> *Narrative*, p. 61.

<sup>219</sup> *Narrative*, p. 61.

The tradition of the female visionary reaches something like a peak during the revolutionary forties and fifties, its most celebrated exponent being the radical Fifth Monarchist, Anna Trapnel. Her *Report and Plea*<sup>220</sup> records Trapnel's arrest, trial, and imprisonment on charges of subversion during 1654. A series of visions impelled Trapnel to visit the South West of England and, like other Fifth Monarchists, she openly criticized the Protectorate and became something of a celebrity due to her strenuous public 'performances'. Spectators saw her apparently taken over by the Holy Spirit 'while out of her mouth issued a stream of prophecies, for two, three or even four hours at a time, by day or by night, and sometimes both'<sup>221</sup>. Her vocal reaction against Cromwell together with these frequent bouts of very public trance-induced hallucinations led to Trapnel's incarceration in Bridewell prison. She remained there eight weeks. Trapnel's narrative is more of a justification of her actions and not a conversion narrative in the style of Beaumont. It is however illustrative of the reaction of authority to individuals suspected of, and especially those willing to admit to, visionary tendencies. Such displays of spiritual possession opened up opportunities for Trapnel to espouse her marginal and often dangerous political agenda; that Beaumont had no desire to promote herself in this way, politically or otherwise, becomes apparent during the course of her narrative and the visions or 'dreams' she admits to experiencing are never public events. Indeed, until her trial, Beaumont is far from being a public figure. In both instances though, real or imagined visions create the possibility of spiritual and political dissent for otherwise powerless women.

The writing of visionary or 'mystic' women forms an intriguing sub-genre of the puritan conversion narrative; but their critical reception is at best, mixed. Ludlow contends that 'Several "mystics" appear to have been silly, vain, and rather egocentric girls who

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<sup>220</sup> Excerpted in Elspeth Graham, et al (eds.), *Her Own Life*, pp. 71-80.

<sup>221</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in Seventeenth-century England* (London: Phoenix Press) 1984, p. 313.



enjoyed attention and were aided and used by male sectaries for their own purposes.’<sup>222</sup>

Christopher Hill argues that the physical manifestation of visionary power – Trapnel famously appeared to go into a trance-like state for twelve days – could easily have been a deliberate form of advertisement and ‘we should allow a good deal for symbolic gestures’.<sup>223</sup> These assessments suggest that the more vocal visionaries were little more than charlatans with agendas that lie well beyond the confines of spiritual autobiography. It is undeniable that several Fifth Monarchist visionaries used their ‘gifts’ to advance political ideas. For Beaumont, though, the visions she experienced came to her in private and form subconscious images that are borne out by her own experiences.

These prophetic *dreams* are evident throughout the narrative but the most interesting depiction of them occurs in a couple of paragraphs as Beaumont is in the process of introducing her theme. She lists a number of dreams that feature strong prophetic elements anticipating actual events, most notably the death of her father:

Me thoughts in my father’s yard grew an old Aple tree, and it was full of fruit. And one night, about the midle of the night, their came a very suddaine storm of wind, and blew this tree up by the roots, and I was sorely troubled to see this tree so suddenly blew down.

I run to it, as it lay upon the ground, to lift it up, to have it grown it its place again. I thought I see it turned up by the roots, and my thoughts I stood lifting as long as I had any strength, as it lay upon the ground, first at one Arm, then at another, but could not stir it out of its place to have it grow in its place again; at last left it, and run to my Brothers to Call help to set this tree in its place again. & I thought when my Brother and his men did Come, they could not make this tree grow in its place again; and, oh, how troubled was I for this tree, and so greived that the wind should blow the tree down and let others stand. And many such things that I see afterwards did signifie some thing.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Dorothy P. Ludlow, ‘Sectarian Women in England, 1641-1700’ in Greaves, R.L., *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press) 1985, p. 102.

<sup>223</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 317.

<sup>224</sup> *Narrative*, pp. 40-41.

This almost hypnotic passage with its insistent repetition of 'in its place' and laboured emphasis of the 'I' being powerless to reverse the will of god, has some parallels with writers such as Trapnel and Beaumont is clear that she believes the dreams to be visions shown to her by god, but there is no indication of the fevered, trance-like prophecies associated with the Fifth Monarchists amongst others. There is no suggestion of a wider agenda here; Beaumont's dreams are as subjective as the rest of her narrative and serve only to lend spiritual emphasis to the events she describes. The dreams Beaumont relates in this short passage describe little else but the plot structure of the narrative to follow. This is rather clumsy and indicative of her limitations as a writer but it does emphasise her own feelings as to their relevance and details such as 'I should often dream... I was tried for my life before a Judge & Jewry, and me thought I did Escape with it' strengthen her insistence that she is among the elect.

To be possessed by the Holy Ghost provided powerful incentives to defy the constraints of the Protectorate and these women were introduced to an authority that superseded worldly patriarchy. The imperative to obey divine instruction meant that any notion of masculine superiority could be dispensed with – possession being in this case the great leveller – and these women, for as long as they displayed symptoms of possession, side-stepped dominant ideas of authority and found a voice.

Perhaps then, Beaumont does display signs of mysticism, although not in the same manner as those cases famously documented by the likes of Trapnel. Beaumont's close, even familiar (as I will discuss below) connection to God often manifests itself in a direct sense during periods of extreme danger or difficulty as if she can call upon divine intervention at will. She eschews the performer-mystic persona and instead displays an internalized, private spiritual connection that both fills her need for religious support and still placates those who

would seize upon extroverted behaviour as a sign of female weakness and attempt to exploit it.

When Beaumont senses that events are moving beyond her control, she prays for intervention. The form her prayer takes is surprisingly geared towards specific acts with successful prayer leading to very real results. The tone is almost conversational and indistinguishable from her interaction with her more worldly acquaintances:

... About a week before, I was very much in prayer with god for two things, for which I set many hours Apart day and night.

And One was that god would please to make way for my going, and make my father willing, who would sometimes be Against my going. And in those days it was like death to me to be kept from such a meeting. And I found at last by Experience that the only way to prevail with my father to let me go to a meeting was to pray hard to god before hand to make him willing. And before that I had often found success according as my crys had been to god in that matter; when I have prayed hard I have found my father Willing, when I have feared other wise; and when I have not, I have found it more defficult.<sup>225</sup>

By conspiring with god, Beaumont gets her own way. That she prays so hard for worldly intervention rather than more spiritual matters is indicative of her worldly position. By the 1670s an emerging middle class had brought with it certain notions of self and many women wrote about their existence as individuals. Collections of letters became popular as did diaries such as those written by Anne Clifford, Countess of Dorset, Pembroke and Montgomery. For Beaumont though, being financially dependent upon an ailing, aging father and still unmarried at twenty-two, any notion of self might have been a rather alien concept. As Ludlow notes, 'Membership in the outlawed sects was an especial burden to women taught all their lives to be obedient and submissive'<sup>226</sup>.

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<sup>225</sup> *Narrative*, p. 41.

<sup>226</sup> Dorothy P. Ludlow, 'Sectarian Women in England 1641 - 1700', p. 110.

When she defies her father and attends a church meeting against his wishes, in the process initiating the scandal that eventually leads to her being tried for his murder, her father threatens to cut her off, plunging Beaumont into one of the few serious bouts of psychological turmoil in the whole narrative. He only retracts this punishment when Beaumont agrees not to attend these meetings and she is spared further confrontation only by her father's sudden death just days later. Personal danger and worship often go together during religious and political revolutions but Beaumont's adversary is not the government, rather the dominant authority represented by her father. That her behaviour towards him causes a crisis in that authority – he resorts to appalling threats against the daughter upon whom he is apparently physically and emotionally dependent – is perhaps unsurprising given the political chaos that ensued after the civil wars. Her position in this society is at best precarious.

The importance of the Bedford congregation to Beaumont is obvious and it appears women were initially at least in the majority of those attending: eight out the initial twelve members were women. Beaumont's name is among the first dozen or so entered into the church records by John Bunyan himself. These congregations forged small communities of like-minded individuals and allowed men and women to commune on as equal a platform as was possible. It is hardly surprising that Beaumont risks quite literally everything in continuing to attend.

## Dissenting from the Nonconformist Grand Narrative

When Lyotard contends that Postmodernism is ‘not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant,’<sup>227</sup> the reader finds a particularly analogous situation in the domestic crises (and perhaps more importantly in her handling of these crises) Agnes Beaumont describes in her spiritual autobiography. Some recent studies of Restoration literature have highlighted a mood approaching postmodernism in the spiritual writing of the nonconformist puritan tradition, particularly in the works of John Bunyan<sup>228</sup>, although few of these consider the works of such marginalised figures as Beaumont. In Agnes Beaumont though, we have a figure who represents the little narrative *within* the little narratives of dissenting nonconformity. She illustrates the validity of Lyotard’s contention that grand narratives can never be absolute, that constant adaptation is necessary if the persecution she describes in her narrative is to be overcome. If ‘Postmodernism’ in this instance is, as Lyotard defines it, a general distrust of grand narratives<sup>229</sup>, then Beaumont’s attitude towards her religion, her family, and her society in general could certainly be read as postmodern. The nascent hegemony of authority – represented here in the first instance by Beaumont’s father and then ultimately by the Courts – would then be a modernist one, coming soon after the civil wars and the upheaval of the ensuing Protectorate and Commonwealth.

Attempts at a definitive solution to the problems of state and spirituality had become increasingly futile and obviously unworkable. Cromwell’s instigation of a Commonwealth in

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<sup>227</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, p. 79.

<sup>228</sup> See in particular, Sim and Walker, *Bunyan and Authority: The Rhetoric of Dissent and the Legitimation Crisis in Seventeenth-Century England* (Bern: Peter Lang) 2000. Other than Tamsin Spargo’s *The Writing of John Bunyan* (Aldershot: Ashgate) 1997, and Christopher Hill’s Marxist-oriented studies, critical writing on this period from theoretical perspectives is, as I have already discussed, rare.

<sup>229</sup> In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard gives the following explanation of the term: ‘The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts’ (p. xxiii). If we accept that ours is a culture built upon a celebration of little narratives – to the exclusion of the grand narratives once taken for granted – then parallels with Restoration England, and especially the nonconformist world in which Beaumont lives, are unavoidable.

1653 had failed; the Protectorate disintegrated under the weak leadership of Cromwell's son and hastened in the Restoration of Charles II by the end of the decade. No one solution met the crises of authority in the aftermath of the Civil War. For every modernism, every grand narrative with intentions of authority – be it the New Model Army, the regicide, the Commonwealth, even the Restoration itself – there was a nagging little narrative to counteract it. These constructs belonged to decades of political turmoil where tradition sat uneasily beside revolutionary ideas; the very idea of authority had passed between extremes of political and religious ideology. This sort of atmosphere could well have exacerbated distrust in the kind of inevitable nonconformity displayed by Beaumont and her congregation.

The 'modernism' of the Courts, Beaumont's spurned and jealous suitor, and the domestic dependence of her father are all called into question by the 'postmodernism' of Beaumont's individual spirituality. The states of flux that result from these differends mirror Lyotard's 'nascent state' and perpetuate a mood of postmodernism alongside the circular psychological patterns of hope and despair that so define spiritual autobiography as a literary mode. So Beaumont's spiritual autobiography is not the linear record of religious conversion convention supposedly dictates but rather a piece of reportage recording the attitudes of a fracturing society. If this is the case then why is her text a part of the literary tradition of puritan conversion narratives? In what sense does Beaumont follow the example of Bunyan, or even Norwood? Is the definition of 'spiritual autobiography' too narrow to encompass every version of the form?

The classic spiritual autobiography builds upon a mood of despair resulting from a sustained period of sinful behaviour, showing the individual first as reprobate and then eventually elevating them into a state of hope and finally election as the 'conversion experience' categorically casts aside feelings of doubt. What marks Beaumont's narrative as being unique is not her burgeoning realisation of being elect, rather that she is aware of her

apparent salvation from the outset. The state of flux she experiences when she is locked out of her father's house after the episode with Bunyan, for example, or her court appearance after the death of her father and the scandal she arouses in the community, occur in spite of this confirmation, suggesting that Lyotard's theory of the existence of differends is not only valid but entirely viable in early modern England as a means of identifying a mood approaching one of postmodernism. The conversion experience is not, for Beaumont at least, the defining moment of 'truth' we might expect it to be; salvation in the spiritual sense might apparently be assured but the intervention of secular concerns (persecutions) are able to pose questions that usurp any air of certainty and sow a familiar, nagging doubt. The truth, or grand narrative of salvation, is gradually and continually impaired by these competing little narratives and what emerges is a clash of phrase regimens that quietly undermine Beaumont's strong spiritual situation. Lyotard's playful assertion regarding nominal designators: 'These names, too, are received. They too do not supply any knowledge about what they name'<sup>230</sup> would seem to summarize neatly the assumptions Beaumont begins to doubt concerning her stated election.

That Beaumont and her persecutors are at odds is demonstrated by the continual presence of differends in her narrative. The list of individuals and institutions arrayed against her is considerable: on a secular level there is the immediate threat posed by her Father's financial hold over her and her near-disinheritance; similarly, there is the mortal danger faced when she is suspected of murdering her father and brought before a magistrate. Beaumont apparently makes an enemy of her entire community by simply being unmarried and in her early twenties and is viewed with suspicion even before the charges are brought before her. On a spiritual level, Beaumont comes into conflict with both her family, where the argument with her father stems as much from her eagerness to attend the nonconformist

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<sup>230</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 40.

meetings at Gamlinghay as it does from her accepting a ride on the back of John Bunyan's horse, and the established church. Set against this background of considerable persecution, Beaumont still manages to maintain a life of domestic servitude and devout spirituality. She is neither a public speaker nor is she a figure of self-promotion. Her employment of compromise and evasion coupled with the confirmation of her salvation, allows Beaumont to continue her modest, quiet, mode of dissent despite these persecutions.

Beaumont's spirituality is a forceful vindication of her faith, it is a more honest expression of the puritan ideal than men like the appropriately named Mr Feery (the man who brings the accusations of murder against her) can contemplate. The threat of creating a scandal never occurs to Beaumont when she accepts the assistance of Bunyan on her way to the meeting; hers is a single-minded (if rather naïve) religiosity, one that overrides the norms of her society; one that brings about the differend that proves so 'unassailable' as it plays out. In a way, Beaumont epitomises the tradition of nonconformity Bunyan and his contemporaries are popularly seen to display. Claims for Beaumont's all-encompassing dissent stem from her selfless secular situation: whereas Bunyan's Christian flees in the face of destruction, leaving behind his family, Beaumont is her Father's carer, and her very private spirituality is the polar opposite of Coppe's or Bunyan's public preaching and of the performance-driven melodrama of Anna Trapnel.

Beaumont's singular attitude toward dissent allows her to disregard almost all societal conventions and it is this quality that ultimately leads her into differend with so many individuals from her community. Feery's spurned father, his reaction to the threatening oddity that the figure of Beaumont presented, and the fantastic accusations he levels at her, is illustrative of Beaumont's rejection of not only his son's advances but of the societal foundations that dictated secular advancement. Beaumont's rejection of yet another



authoritarian metanarrative brings her into conflict with every facet of mainstream thought. Her existence is one of perpetual differend – a continual postmodern state.

There are examples of Beaumont's skill at compromise as a method of easing the conflict at the heart of her life. She placates her father by agreeing to forgo the Baptist meetings despite having already expressed her despair at the thought of being kept from attending: 'And in those days it was like death to me to be kept from such a meeting.' Threatened with exclusion from her father's house and his inheritance, Beaumont becomes reconciled with him by submitting to his wishes:

*hussif, said he, what do you say? If yow will promise me never to go to a meeting Again as long as I live, hear is the key; take it, and go in; and he held the key out to me. Said he, I will never offer it to yow more, and I am resolved yow shall never come within my doors Again, while I live. And I stood Crying by him in the yard. So he spake hastily to me, what do yow say, hussif, said he, will yow promise me or no?*

*Well father, said I, I will promise yow that I will never go to a meeting; Again, as long as yow live, without your consent; not thinking what dole and misery I brought upon myself in so Doing.*<sup>231</sup>

Although this may be construed as evidence of a possible motive for the alleged murder since her father dies just days after this exchange, Beaumont here sacrifices her worldly spiritual contact to protect her secular future as well as the mental well-being of her ailing father whose sense of morality is at odds with (yet another differend) his relationship with his daughter. By compromising, Beaumont factors in the repercussions of her meeting her father's viewpoint with a similarly unshakable one: adapting to circumstance at the expense of personal fulfilment. The lack of constancy, the lack of authority, in Beaumont's day-to-day life makes a state of flux unavoidable. Every crisis that is met with a metanarrative is in

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<sup>231</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont*, in John Stachniewski (ed.), *Grace Abounding with other Spiritual Autobiographies*. This edition presents the text in excerpted form but retains the original spelling which, in my opinion, lends more emotional impact to this passage.

turn supplanted by a succession of little narratives; Beaumont continually constructs these little narratives in response to hegemonic authority.

### **Domestic and Legal Little Narratives**

The second half of the *Narrative* recounts the events surrounding the accusations made by the aptly named Mr Feery regarding her alleged involvement in the death of her father. Although it transpires that the accusations have no grounding, and that John Beaumont died of heart failure, Beaumont is in some danger of being tried for murder. Strengthened by earlier dreams of these events and their outcome she faces her accusers with remarkable strength and eloquence, easily impressing her innocence upon the coroner:

And there I stood in the parlour among them, with my heart full of comfort as ever it could hold; and I was got above the fears of men and devils.<sup>232</sup>

Certainty of her salvation allows Beaumont to endure worldly persecution with confidence, and having the comfort of knowing the favourable outcome of the trial means that the whole episode becomes a rather positive experience: it makes her stronger.

Beaumont's enduring sense of election is perhaps most strongly emphasised after accusations are levelled at her in the aftermath of the death of her father. Although her accuser is swiftly dismissed by the authorities, Beaumont might well have stood trial for murder given the circumstances of the death and her own notoriety within the locality; despite this she shows a serenity during the proceedings that betrays her psychological grounding. Rather than the adversarial stance we see in the trials of Laurence Clarkson, Abiezer Coppe, and especially John Bunyan, where accusations fly back and forth between defendant and prosecutor, Beaumont's heart is 'full of Comfort'. In fact, the process

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<sup>232</sup> *Narrative*, p. 78.

becomes yet another confirmation of Beaumont's confidence in her salvation instead of the violent secularity of comparable trials documented in other spiritual writing. In his *A Relation of the Imprisonment of John Bunyan*, a collection of reports and letters not published until 1765, Bunyan gives a vivid portrayal of his trial and in particular the heated exchanges that occur within the courtroom. The dialogues presented are full of wit and bravado, the following example being typical:

*Another.* One of them said, he will do harm; let him speak no further.

*Just. Keel.* Justice *Keelin* said, No, no, never fear him, we are better established than so; he can do no harm, we know the Common Prayer-book hath been ever since the Apostles time, and is lawful to be used in the church.

*Bun.* I said, shew me the place in the epistles, where the Common Prayer-book is written, or one text of Scripture, that commands me to read it, and I will use it. But yet, notwithstanding, said I, they that have a mind to use it, they have their liberty; that is, I would not keep them from it, but for our parts, we can pray to God without it. Blessed be his name.

With that one of them said, who is your God? Beelzebub?<sup>233</sup>

It is important to remember here Bunyan's experiences as a preacher; his charisma and, quite frankly, showman-like behaviour are self-evident and the text bristles with confidence. That said, the differences between Beaumont's serene, patient responses and Bunyan's courageous retorts are palpable. Bunyan manifests aggression, Beaumont, contentment. This is all the more remarkable when we consider the potential sentence awaiting Beaumont should she have been found guilty.

Liza Picard provides a vivid account of the kind of penalties that awaited the convicted prisoner during the mid-seventeenth century, where

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<sup>233</sup> John Bunyan, *A Relation of the Imprisonment* in John Stachniewski, ed., *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, pp. 108-109.

Stealing from people or houses, with or without violence, was the most common crime. If the value of the stolen goods exceeded 12d, theft was punishable by death... The prisoner's chances of acquittal were minimal. He could not compel the attendance of any witness he wanted to call, and it would take a brave man voluntarily to confront the majesty of the law arraigned on the prosecution side to give evidence of the accused.<sup>234</sup>

It will be profitable to consider further the state of criminal law in England during this period. Beaumont's alleged crime carried harsh penalties and her predicament should not be underestimated. The political revolution of the previous decades had certainly modernised the government of the country but the law was an institution dependent upon the past and, as Holdsworth writes:

'Though many additions had been made by recent statutes, its underlying principles were very medieval; and this characteristic was particularly striking in the criminal procedure of the period. The rules of process and pleading were as strict as ever – the statutes of jeofail, which modified their stringency in civil cases, did not apply to criminal cases... the misnomer of the accused, even bad grammar, were fatal.'<sup>235</sup>

It is against this worryingly archaic background that the unfounded accusations against Beaumont are made.

After the death of Beaumont's father, the narrative becomes something like hard-boiled crime fiction and Beaumont's realistic prose style begins to come into its own. Her application of the spiritual autobiographical mode moves far from the classic model here and she successfully uses the text as a means of commenting on her situation within nonconformist society. At this point Mr Feery enters the story and makes his, rather blunt, accusation against Beaumont to her brother:

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<sup>234</sup> Liza Picard, *Restoration London* (London: Phoenix Press) 2001 pp. 233 & 235.

<sup>235</sup> Sir William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law vol. VI*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd) 1924, pp. 629-630.

Said my brother, “How do you think he came by his end, if he did not die a natural death?”

Said he, “I believe your sister poisoned him.”

“I hope,” said my brother, “we shall satisfy you to the contrary.”<sup>236</sup>

Mr Feery has been the subject of some critical speculation. Patricia L. Bell writes:

Right at the end we come to the cause of so much of Agnes’ trouble; why Mr Feery had set her father against her; why he had accused her of poisoning her father; why he caused trouble with her brother-in-law. The old man’s will had been made four years before his death, ‘and Mr Feery made it. And then he put my father on to give me more than my Sister because of some designe he had then, but afterwards I came to go to meetings, he was turned Against me’. We must suppose that he had thought that Agnes would make a suitable wife for his own son, Thomas Feery, five years older than Agnes, and still unmarried.<sup>237</sup>

Whatever ‘designe’ Feery had had a long gestation and his plan appears to have been a particularly convoluted one. The suggestion here is that Feery convinced John Beaumont to bequeath a larger portion of his inheritance to Agnes who would then marry Thomas Feery and benefit from the extra cash. Feery’s frustration must have been twofold: the old man lived a further four years and Beaumont had remained unmarried and was her father’s carer. These facts, on top of the unfounded murder accusation suggest that Feery was a fairly implausible character whose vindictive nature soon became apparent, something borne out by his treatment in court as recorded in the narrative:

[Feery] made such a strange preamble that no body knew what to make of it, of the deference that was between my father and I; And of my being shut out of doors; and my fathers dying too nights after I came in...

*So, said the Crouner, This is nothing to the matter in hand; what have yow to Accuse this Maid with?*

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<sup>236</sup> *Confessions*, p. 71.

<sup>237</sup> Patricia L. Bell, ‘Agnes Beaumont of Edworth’, pp. 15-16.

But he said but litle, or nothing to the purpose, So that the Coroner was very Angry, at the Contrary Answers that he gave him.<sup>238</sup>

Feery's behaviour towards the Beaumonts is mentioned earlier in the narrative and it seems likely that his malign intent towards them lingered for many years only to manifest itself in the accusation. The evidence against Beaumont is practically nonexistent and from almost the outset Feery is challenged by a number of jurors as to the motive behind his accusation. It is perhaps his pedantic demeanour that spares Beaumont a guilty verdict.

However strong her demeanour might be before the court, in private, Beaumont writes, the seriousness of her situation propelled her into a serious test of her salvation and a direct plea for divine intervention:

So now I had a new work lay before me, and I did betake my self to prayre, to fly to god for help, and that he would please to appeer for me in this fiery trial. I see my life lye at stake, and the name of god lye their too; and many prayres & teers was powred out to god, and that sweet Cordial the Lord sent me to Comfort me; Oh it was a blessed promise indeed; and blessed be god he also made it good.<sup>239</sup>

Beaumont will have been aware of course of the possibility that the trial could go against her; that it would be quashed because of a lack of evidence was by no means a certainty. The political climate was generally uncertain and crime levels – or at least the reporting of crimes – had fluctuated massively in the decades leading up to the Civil War, making for an unstable legal environment. As Herrup notes, 'Despite the general decline in reported homicides, the proportion of deaths prosecuted as murders rose from 47 percent in the 1590s to 85 percent in the 1630s.'<sup>240</sup> The manner of crime for which Beaumont is tried carried particularly harsh sentences (in this instance, a guilty verdict would almost certainly be met with capital

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<sup>238</sup> *Narrative*, p. 220.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 216-217.

<sup>240</sup> Cynthia B. Herrup, *The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth Century England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1987, p. 40.

punishment) and Beaumont is fortunate that the magistrate recognises Feery for the dubious witness he was. Stronger evidence would have seen Beaumont charged with the premeditated murder of an invalid, a crime viewed with much severity: 'Most executions... punished persons involved in intrusive crimes that suggested calculated rather than opportunistic behaviour.'<sup>241</sup> Sentencing in the seventeenth century was often brutal and went some way to sating the public's desire for appeasement. As Cynthia B. Herrup again notes in a chilling summation of the social climate:

In fact, contemporary arguments against capital punishment emphasized not the brutality of execution, but its swiftness. Death by hanging, it was complained, came too quickly after conviction either for a felon to be penitent, or for spectators to absorb the social lesson of misconduct.<sup>242</sup>

That Beaumont escaped punishment at all is remarkable, that she did so with her state of grace intact is all the more extraordinary. This whole episode is an effective demonstration of the individual dispossession of a series of grand narratives. It occurs on a number of levels and Beaumont is seen to benefit from the failings of these grand narratives, deflecting the persecutions of the courts, as well as Mr Feery and the community as a whole, and, at this point at least, her faith emerges as strong as ever. Her use of the spiritual autobiography to communicate this high level dissent is particularly impressive and a more convincing record of grace than Bunyan's cyclical psychological extremes of faith in election or certainty of damnation.

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid, p. 174.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

## Domestic Dissent and Spiritual Crises

I shall consider now Beaumont's narrative with regard to the manifestations of dissent as they occur in her text and how these relate to the crises, both secular and spiritual, that present themselves during the course of the extraordinary events recorded here. In order to highlight the importance of sequential narration in spiritual autobiography, I shall follow the episodic pattern of Beaumont's writing and offer a close reading that will at the same time show how divisive a text it is when read alongside other examples of the genre.

Beaumont's frankness in relating the psychological effects of intense soul-searching and self-examination can be discerned from the immediacy of her voice:

None knoweth but God the sore trials and temptations that I have warded through in my day, some outward, but more inward.<sup>243</sup>

Beaumont's acceptance that hers is as much an inward anguish as it is an outward, public one is made clear from the very beginning of the narrative. Internal soul-searching is a well-documented feature of the conversion narrative but Beaumont's phraseology suggests a modern preoccupation with the notion of self rather than the kind of allegorical martyrdom and symbolism characteristic of John Bunyan. 'Some outward, but *more inward*' (the italics are my own) is a bold underlining of Beaumont's spiritual make-up. This declaration likewise presents an intimate relationship she shares with God. This is again something apart from the public religion she experiences with the rest of the congregation at Gamlinghay. The Baptist meetings Beaumont attended were of course fully democratic in both organisation and in the culture of worship (although not in terms of gender). In such an environment, ideas would be shared and debated but one must wonder how much of an individual's private spirituality, especially the extreme fluctuations writers of spiritual

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<sup>243</sup> *Narrative*, p. 37.



autobiographies allude to, was brought to these congregations. What reception did a narrative like Beaumont's receive before such an audience?

Christopher Hill posits that

If ministers were dependent on the voluntary contributions of their congregations, as was made explicit by the church covenant in Independent churches, they would also have to reflect the theological and political outlook of these congregations, and so the church as an organ for imposing and maintaining a single consistent outlook would cease to exist.<sup>244</sup>

Without the authoritative direction of the state church, the sects had fashioned a wholly independent method of worship, one that championed the idea of the Mechanick Preacher who laboured during the week and ministered on a Sunday. Other congregational leaders relied on the donations of their charges. Such preachers would have to be sympathetic to an often psychologically unstable flock whose internal misery was as acute as their outward sufferings.

Classic spiritual autobiography's reliance upon outward trials and temptations is of course something of a cliché. Bunyan for one is at pains to stress his 'pedegree' of impoverishment at the very beginning of *Grace Abounding* so that

The goodness and bounty of God towards me, may be the more advanced and magnified before the sons of men.<sup>245</sup>

His concern is to emphasise the external suffering he overcame; salvation *in spite* of outward circumstances. A tradition of self-impoverishment exists in spiritual autobiography, of developing a background that is rich in oppression, poverty, and minimal education – credentials that seem as important to the conversion process as evidence of god's grace. As well as the opening of *Grace Abounding*, consider the following passages:

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<sup>244</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 99.

<sup>245</sup> *Grace Abounding* p. 6.

I was born of Christian parents and under them educated till about 15 years of age: In whom there was a severe Disposition and cariage towards me suitable to that mass of sin and folly which was bound up in my heart.<sup>246</sup>

About Ten or Eleven Years of Age I went to *London*, and there went to several schools, until I was about Seventeen Years of Age; in all which time, I was not without much Trouble and Exercises in my my Mind; notwithstanding I lived in a wicked family, and amongst those that scoffed at all strictness in Religion<sup>247</sup>

Although Richard Norwood's upbringing was based around the doctrine of Original Sin, the manner of its relation in his writing bears much similarity to that of John Crook in its depiction of a confrontational childhood that had to be endured and overcome before spiritual conversion. Overcoming societal adversary – more often than not self-imposed but also, as in the case of Norwood, inherited financial trials – is then a conventional allegorical tool representing the outward threat of reprobation. As well as his very vocal admission of 'meanness' of background, Bunyan goes on to chart a series of trials and temptations (not to mention a whole swathe of vices) that mark a very public road to salvation. His conversion narrative, like that of Lawrence Clarkson, is a record of external influences that threaten an inward sense of election. There does exist (as I have explored in previous chapters) an internal conflict but it is more of a reactionary state brought about by secular weakness – despair is the result of external sin, or, a form of penance. By eschewing the tradition of railing against outward reprobate influence, although she suffers her fair share of external trials, Beaumont is able to concentrate her narrative on her inward spiritual experiences.

Another element of classic spiritual autobiography (perhaps the most celebrated quality) to be disregarded by Beaumont is the notion of the conversion experience, something frequently seen as being evidence of election, the attainment of which marks the end of the

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<sup>246</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 125. For a full reading of Norwood's spiritual autobiography, see chapter four.

<sup>247</sup> John Crook, *A Short History of the Life of John Crook*, in, John Stachniewski (ed.) *Grace Abounding with other Spiritual Autobiographies*, pp. 159-60.

Puritan search for confirmation of grace. In his *Pilgrim's Progress*, an indisputably successful fictionalisation of the classic spiritual conversion narrative, John Bunyan's character Christian famously experiences this epiphany when his burden (fear, doubt, paranoia, in fact all the highly emotive qualities to be found in records of the predestinarian doctrine) quite literally falls away with a particularly allegorical flourish. While there can be no doubt that Bunyan's is a true experimental Calvinism, his fellow worshiper – and in many ways, his protégé – deviates somewhat in her relation of spiritual progress. Beaumont never once records any example of sinful behaviour, something laboured over and obsessed about by the likes of Clarkson and Bunyan, and her narrative doesn't really conform to the phases of election suggested by William Perkins' table of progress to salvation. Beaumont's trials tend to be domestic or legal in nature or else misunderstandings as in the Bunyan episode; in every instance though, her faith, while certainly tested, remains strong, and as she herself confides:

Oh, the great consolations and enlargements of heart, with fervent desires after Jesus Christ and his grace, which hath often made me thank God for trouble when I have found it drive me nearer to himself and to the throne of his Grace! <sup>248</sup>

Beaumont's allusions to the familiar nature of her relationship with God differ greatly from Bunyan's vision of a watchful master, ever ready to threaten those who deviate from his prescribed mode of behaviour. The spiritual strength Beaumont experiences is the result of a benevolent deity, one eager to encourage a young woman beset by any number of dangerous situations. Her telling remark that 'before a trial hath come upon me I have had great consolations from God',<sup>249</sup> is a far more positive depiction of the power Bunyan is assaulted by in *Grace Abounding*:

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<sup>248</sup> *Narrative*, p. 37.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid* p. 38.

I looked up to Heaven, and was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as a being very hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these, and other my ungodly practices.<sup>250</sup>

There really is no comparable passage in Beaumont's narrative. She is certain of her elect status and never deviates from her own unshakable piety even when the trials begin to stack up against her. It may be that Beaumont is quite simply a more pious figure than Bunyan, and her narrative mentions none of the 'ungodly practices' laboured over by him in his spiritual autobiography; it might be that she is less contemplative and content to accept her state of grace without too much in the way of soul-searching. Vera Camden elaborates on this less than flattering reading of Beaumont's character, and when commenting on her success in securing a ride on the back of Bunyan's horse, notes that Beaumont 'gloats over the accomplishment'.<sup>251</sup> This momentary overconfidence should not be over-emphasised, nor should we suggest that Beaumont's certainty of election is the result of self-delusion. It is important however to question why Beaumont's narrative is devoid of any hint at past sin or 'ungodliness'.

Beaumont begins her narrative in a state of grace and proceeds to provide continual evidence of that state with little in the way of doubt as to her eventual salvation. This is a major deviation from the path to spiritual calling as mapped by both Bunyan and William Perkins. Her nonconformity to stylistic convention is no doubt the result of her perceived close relationship with god. There is no fear, none of the dictatorial teaching we see in *Grace Abounding*; it is a democratic partnership Beaumont grows to depend upon. Indeed, her spirituality is actually heightened in times of crisis due to the dialogue she enters into:

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<sup>250</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 10.

<sup>251</sup> Vera Camden, 'Introduction', *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 20.

About a quarter of a year before God was pleased to take away my father, I had great and frequent enjoyments of God; and he was pleased to pour out a spirit of grace and supplication upon me in a wonderful manner, day and night.<sup>252</sup>

If her tone here is approaching evangelicalism there is every evidence that Beaumont's sense of grace lends her an air of positivism, of spiritual confidence, that acts as a coping mechanism against her often harsh secular treatment as well as against the psychological turmoil experienced by her peers. Nowhere is this more evident than when she faces the murder charge and appears before a court. If ever a state of grace was assured, this example provides proof:

Some gentlemen that were upon the jury said, they should never forget me, to see with what a cheerful countenance I stood before them all. They said I did not look like one that was guilty. I know not how I looked, but I know my heart was full of peace and comfort.<sup>253</sup>

Compare this sentiment with this passage from Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found*:

So that now I can say, of all my formal righteousness, and professed wickedness, I am stripped naked, and in room thereof clothed with innocency of life, perfect assurance, and seed of discerning with the spirit of revelation.<sup>254</sup>

There is a fundamental difference between Beaumont and the wider nonconformist tradition; Clarkson's conversion<sup>255</sup> is a reflective one, coming after a sustained period of doubt (and of self-perpetuating sinful behaviour), whereas Beaumont's earlier sense of election allowed her to bear the weight of her trials with a heart 'full of peace and comfort'.

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<sup>252</sup> *Narrative*, p. 39.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>254</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 190.

<sup>255</sup> See chapter three, below.

Confirmation of salvation brings with it a more grounded approach to the psychological minefield that was Calvinist predestination. Christopher Hill alludes to the 'Religious melancholy and despair' that resulted from the culture of predestination, highlighting some of the extreme physical and psychological manifestations (again, both the external and internal are involved in the journey to salvation) of Puritanism:

The Fifth Monarchist John Rogers was in fear of hell, doubted the existence of God, John Saltmarsh had temptations of suicide before 1645, and was rescued by conversion to the doctrine of free grace. Sarah Wright was in the grave of deep despair for four years before 1647. Around 1646 William Franklin believed that God had deserted him: his physician recommended bloodletting. Isaac Pennington the Younger about 1649 was 'broken and dashed to pieces in my religion... in a congregational way.'<sup>256</sup>

The list of symptoms experienced by her peers makes Beaumont's psychology all the more remarkable for its stability and constancy. These qualities play a vital part in both her successful appearance in court and in the aftermath where her appropriation of what Lyotard terms *svelteness*, (See chapter three for a full discussion of this in relation to Laurence Clarkson) the ability to supplant difficulty with a flexible attitude by adapting to circumstance, leads again to fulfilment and moral superiority in the face of a vindictive hegemony.

The source of the murder accusation, the murky figure of Mr Feery, thwarted, and in many ways disgraced by the magistrate, then attempts to embezzle Beaumont out of her inheritance. The background to this episode is as convoluted as the initial accusations brought against Beaumont and have been discussed earlier in this chapter. After John Beaumont's death, Feery attempts to set Agnes's brother-in-law against her by telling him he could 'set him in a way to Come in for a part'. Beaumont's writing conveys again the drama

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<sup>256</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 171.

with eloquence and the poetic style of a writer of fiction, again perhaps displaying qualities later adopted by the likes of Defoe:

So now I thought surely my troubles and tryals up on that Account was at an End. I thought Mr Feery had vented all his malice now; but he had not he was resolved to have Another pull with me. Seeing he was prevented of my life, he did attempt to take Away what my father left me.<sup>257</sup>

Rather than face him again in court, Beaumont agrees to the making of a payment to her brother-in-law, placating the authorities and foiling Mr Feery again. This is a massive show of strength on her part, and as she concludes with remarkable candour: ‘I agreed to give my brother three score pounds for peace and quietness’<sup>258</sup>. This superb example of Beaumont’s sveltteness shows an ability to be adaptable in the face of Feery’s unending differend. The key quality of this episode is, however, Beaumont’s decorum throughout, particularly her summation of the events:

Well one great mercy the Lord was pleased to add to all the rest; he was pleased to keep prejudice out of my heart to this man!<sup>259</sup>

Compared to the vindictiveness in Clarkson’s narrative, or to the outbursts seen in the court appearances of Bunyan and Coppe, Beaumont’s response is confident, thoughtful, and more importantly, mature, despite her young age.

Beaumont’s narrative concludes with a final assuredness when she resolves to confront those spreading further gossip and accusations suggesting she had confessed to her father’s murder:

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<sup>257</sup> *Narrative*, p. 222.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

The Lord was wonderful good to my soul that morning; that scripture ran mightily through my mind as I was going to market... I was very comfortable in my soul, as I was going and when I came there.<sup>260</sup>

In this instance, Beaumont's faith is strengthened in the face of universal doubt from her society; for her, election represents spiritual closure despite such a lack of secular acceptance. The conclusion of Beaumont's narrative leaves the reader with a familiar sense that the adherents of experimental Calvinism, particularly those like Beaumont fixated on the notion of predestination, are unable to accept fully evidence of their election. It is as if the conversion experience – something hitherto taken for granted in Beaumont's spiritual autobiography – never really takes hold; that nagging doubt whether in one's individual spirituality, moral well-being, or in whatever nonconformist sect one resides, pervades the puritan consciousness and no sense of contentment is ever really attained.

Despite opening her narrative with a surety that suggests to the reader that she is free of the psychological turmoil that abounds in the genre as a whole, Beaumont ends it with a statement that is both enigmatic and shocking in its reneging on what has previously been stated with absolute authority. All the knowing certainty (bordering on glibness at certain points especially during the trial) is quashed in a single concluding remark that is unheralded and yet delivered with characteristic honesty:

Thus I have told you of the good and evil things that I have met with in that dispensation. I wish I was as well in my soul as I was then.<sup>261</sup>

Beaumont's life after the extraordinary events recorded in her narrative was not without incident. She did not marry until 1702 (by which time she was fifty years old) and the marriage lasted just five years when her husband, Thomas Warren, died. She did remarry but

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, p. 83.



remained childless and died in 1720; she was sixty-eight years old. There is no reason to doubt that Beaumont spent the years between the death of her father and her first marriage – a period of twenty-five years – at the family farm. John Beaumont's will provided at least £150 for his daughter and one wonders how someone as emotionally sound and apparently spiritually privileged as Beaumont became ostracized to such a degree. Was the scandal initiated by Mr Feery that damaging? Were the effects of her relationship (whatever form that actually took) with John Bunyan so enduring? Whatever the reasons, Beaumont hardly seems to have basked in her certainty of election.

This adds further credence to the suggestion that the conversion experience is the celebratory conclusion of the puritan religious journey. Predestination bred a culture of paranoia, one that persisted in the form of nagging doubt long after confirmation of salvation. Seen from this perspective the nonconformist community itself forms the kind of dispute Jean-Francois Lyotard alludes to in his explanation of the Differend; there can be no possible reconciliation and apparently no certainty in radical Puritanism, certainly not for Agnes Beaumont. Perhaps it is a mark of the fear, doubt, and real sense of postmodernism in Restoration England that the crisis that emerged in the wake of the Civil War found no real resolution until the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Rather than being placated, dissenters like Beaumont were simply quieted, their sectarian groups gradually consumed by the authority of the organised Church once again.

## **‘That voice which is mine’<sup>262</sup>: Conclusion**

Just as Beaumont’s text dissents from the structural expectations of classic spiritual autobiography, her writing presents another form of dissent in the way it voices her persecutions without apology. N. H. Keeble notes that women writing in the seventeenth century ‘almost invariably’ prefaced their texts with an apology ‘for their transgression in speaking with a public voice when silent retirement was proper and becoming a woman’.<sup>263</sup> The lack of such a preface to the *Narrative* is probably due to its late publication in 1760, but the tone of the text throughout is anything but apologetic and it is undeniable that Beaumont fights her corner and voices her little narratives with honesty and assurance.

Beaumont’s unapologetic style means the snapshot of her life she describes provides invaluable insight into female experience in rural early-modern England. Vera Camden posits a sympathetic reading of Beaumont’s importance as a historical figure when she writes that:

the significance of her narrative extends beyond its interest as a rustic yarn. Beaumont’s capacity to engage her audience and characterize her plight before a court of law saved her from being burned at the stake... Equally notable, Beaumont does not in her prose follow the basic pattern of female autobiography set up by the tradition of the conversion testimony.<sup>264</sup>

Beaumont’s narrative is in very real terms a document of a young woman’s everyday experiences. In it she shares her thoughts on everything from the sudden death of her father to the problems of how to get home from an evening spent at a neighbouring village.

Although the time frame of the text is only a matter of a few days, Beaumont is able to

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<sup>262</sup> From an anonymous, untitled folio volume of religious poetry attributed to Anna Trapnel quoted from, Kate Chedzoy, Melanie Hansen and Suzanne Trill (eds.), *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) 1998, p. 4.

<sup>263</sup> N. H. Keeble (ed.), *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge) 1994, p. 264.

<sup>264</sup> Camden, Vera (ed.), *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 13.

convey successfully her opinions on rural gossip and the day-to-day lives of her peers; provide moving insight into her spirituality – especially her feelings of salvation and her position among the elect – as an active member of a thriving Baptist congregation; and give a full testimonial of her involvement in a dissenting nonconformist community and the suspicions and obstacles such activity generated.

Despite this variation in subject matter, Beaumont's writing remains consistently economical and familiar, and above all highly readable. She is able to communicate moments of extreme religious fervour (in the run up to her trial, or after being shut out of her father's home, for example) without losing the stylistic immediacy that also lends such minute detail and candour to the familiar dilemmas and experiences she writes about. It is this mix of high spiritual concepts – of the kind familiar to readers of nonconformist writing – alongside the secular and mundane aspects of her life that makes her narrative so compelling and historically important. This thematic combination also draws attention to the power Beaumont is able to draw upon in order to challenge the grand narratives that threaten her domestic situation.

Beaumont is forthright in the way she writes about her dissent. Her refutation of Mr Feery's accusations is intelligent and strenuous and manages to convey a sense of secular disbelief in the midst of spiritual assurance:

At the first hearing of it, my heart sank in me, and it was a very sad and sudden surprise to me. But I quickly said to him, "Oh, brother, blessed be God for a clear conscience." But although I knew myself clear in the sight of God, yet anybody must needs think these were hard things for one so young as I to meet with.<sup>265</sup>

Writing like this is a more direct assault upon authority than the subtle representations of written dissent identified by Anita Pacheco, who suggests seventeenth-century women

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<sup>265</sup> *Narrative*, p. 72.

writers often produced 'an early modern version of feminine writing, which strained to conform to rather than flout the feminine ideal'.<sup>266</sup> There are suggestions of these traits in Beaumont's writing but she transcends them on more than one occasion, most notably when she visits the market after her acquittal choosing consciously to face her accusers and the gossip-mongers who were the source of her persecutions. The episode is worth quoting at length:

So I went to my sister Everads to rest me; and when it was full market, I went to show myself among them. And when I came into the market, the poor people could not follow their business that they were about, but I think I may say almost all the eyes of the market were fixed upon me. Here I could see half a dozen stand together, whispering and pointing at me; and there I should see another company stand talking together. So I walked through and through the market. Thought I, "If there were a thousand more of you, I could lift up my head before you all." I was very cheerful, for I was very well in my soul that day.

So a great many came to me and said, "We see you are not distracted." And I saw some cry, and some laugh. "Oh," thought I, "mock on; there is a day a coming will clear all."<sup>267</sup>

This is a successful assertion of Beaumont's little narrative. It also illustrates the differend that exists in her community and Beaumont's faith in her place within the grand narrative to come. Spargo has called this episode a 'triumphant self-display'<sup>268</sup> and I would argue it proves how much authority confirmation of grace lends to Beaumont's form of little dissent during the period of her persecution. Her spiritual autobiography provides a means of voicing the persecution she endures and dissents from the expected gendered spirituality that Diane Willen suggests 'rarely questioned or challenged the patriarchal ideal'.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Anita Pacheco, 'Introduction', *Early Women Writers: 1600-1720* (London and New York: Longman) 1998, p. 8.

<sup>267</sup> *Narrative*, p. 83.

<sup>268</sup> Tamsin Spargo, *The Writing of John Bunyan* (Aldershot: Ashgate) 1997, p. 90.

<sup>269</sup> Diane Willen, 'Religion and the Construction of the Feminine' in, Anita Pacheco (ed.), *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) 2002, p. 38.

By asserting her perceived election from the outset, Beaumont, in *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, dissents from the received classic model of spiritual autobiography exemplified in Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and her narrative is less concerned with the search for evidence of grace; rather it presents her responses to a series of emotional and physical crises that appear to cement her soteriological assurance and negate the need to justify her spiritual standing. She is in a very real sense the epitome of the little narrative refusing to placate the various modes of authority that are the cause of her persecutions. Her successful dissent is tempered however by her final remarks that illustrate with devastating immediacy the lack of legitimation even she experiences despite repeated exclamations to the contrary, proving the existence – and dominance – of the a differend that prevents the occurrence of an absolute conversion experience.

## Chapter Three

### Laurence Clarkson: Svelte Captain of the Rant

#### Introduction

The conception of a postmodern revolutionary England is not a new critical position, but studies that have approached the dissenting literature of the mid-to-late seventeenth century from this kind of theoretical position have been concentrated largely upon major writers like John Bunyan<sup>270</sup>. In this chapter I shall address a lesser-known writer from the furthest margins of dissenting nonconformism whose spiritual autobiography displays an often startling individualism and unpredictability that would seem to illustrate the mood of postmodernism apparent in England during the mid-seventeenth century.

As an example of sectarian literature – and it is tempting in this instance to adopt a stronger term: guerrilla writing might prove more applicable – Laurence Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found* unconsciously illustrates the hope, despair, and confusion that reflect the nonconformist experience during the revolutionary years of 1640-1660. I stress the adverb 'unconsciously' because Clarkson's text is very much in the tradition of the Puritan spiritual autobiography, a subjective examination of his soteriological growth, and is as much about looking inward as it is a commentary on the wider world. Clarkson is invariably grouped with those other polemicists who have been labelled as Ranters. The history and influence of the individuals grouped under this moniker has been summarised neatly by A.L. Morton as

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<sup>270</sup> See, Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, and Tamsin Spargo, *The Writing of John Bunyan*.

having, '[come] into sudden prominence towards the end of 1649, reached its peak in the following year and thereafter seems to have survived only in fragments,'<sup>271</sup> and so for this reason, the chapter will begin with a survey of these dissenters, their beliefs, and their writing. This will give a detailed illustration of the social context in which Clarkson operated and provide the necessary cultural background that so informed his work and his spiritual nonconformity. The intention here is to place Clarkson ultimately within what I see as the equivalent of a postmodern cultural environment, to show how he, and more importantly his spiritual autobiography, is a product of this overwhelming mood of scepticism, of distrust toward forms of authority, and that the Ranter ideal – if indeed there was one – symbolized and was a response to, that culture.

Specifically, the theoretical model against which Clarkson shall be read is Jean Francois Lyotard's notion of svelteness. For Lyotard, to be svelte is to be flexible, adaptable; 'the ideal is no longer the physical force of ancient peoples; it is flexibility, speed, metamorphic capacity (one goes to the ball in the evening, and one wages war the next day at dawn)'.<sup>272</sup> Svelteness at individual level threatens the stability of hegemonic authority. The grand narrative of authority whether political, religious, traditional, is therefore subordinate to increasingly unpredictable little narratives and what Lyotard would classify as competing phrase regimens, in this instance represented by the nonconformist sects, whose doctrine impacted heavily upon the notion of grand narratives like the conversion experience for dissenting individuals. This chapter will consider the svelteness at work within Clarkson's experiences and illustrate how the necessity of adapting to subjective ideas brings about a clash – a *differend* – of little narratives and discern whether within this mood of

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<sup>271</sup> A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 71.

<sup>272</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question', in *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers* (Paris: Galilee) 1986.

postmodernism Clarkson ever does find the spiritual certainty he claims to achieve in his narrative.

## **The Ranters**

The current study of Laurence Clarkson's spiritual autobiography will begin with an examination of the sect with which he is popularly associated in order to contextualise his position within the nonconformist framework of the late seventeenth century. Ranters form the 'lunatic fringe' of protestant nonconformism. Popular misconceptions and rumour fuelled the demonization of a few individuals whose beliefs challenged received thought even within the spiritual free-for-all that was the aftermath of the English revolution. Men like Abiezer Coppe, whose sympathies lay somewhere to the left of the Digger Gerard Winstanley, became synonymous with the popular image of the Ranter. His doctrine preached such 'blasphemies' as free love, pantheism, and a profound concern for the poor. As a result, he was arrested, imprisoned, and his works were burned. Placed in the context of the Interregnum, Coppe's writing is unquestionably radical but hardly more so than other nonconformist thinkers (Winstanley's *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* was published in 1649 for example and, as Barry Coward has written, 'advocated the restructuring of many major aspects of society, government, law, and education'<sup>273</sup>), and yet his treatment at the hands of authority was particularly harsh. Such was the extent of intolerance toward those assumed to display Ranter sympathies.

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<sup>273</sup> Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age: England 1603 – 1714* (London: Longman) 2003, pp. 243-244.



Rather than suggesting a particular mode of worship like other sects active during the 1650s, the term ‘Ranter’ became a term of abuse, directed at those whose ideas overstepped the amorphous boundaries of revolutionary decency. It was, as Andrew Hopton has argued, ‘a pejorative [term] used to describe those whose opinions were seen as extreme and dangerous by others who wished to dissociate themselves from such people and to appear more moderate in their own opinions’.<sup>274</sup>

Ranters often share uneasy comparison with the other sects that became popular during the 1640s and 1650s. Some, like the Baptists and the Quakers<sup>275</sup>, carved a rather less radical (although no less marginalised) position after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, whilst others – the Diggers, Levellers, Muggletonians among others – were either suppressed by the Government or diminished over time. They all, however, share a common property; they consisted of more or less like-minded members and held a common belief system. The term ‘Ranter’ often refers to certain assumptions about certain individuals whose beliefs do not necessarily correlate; people who often never met are bound together by this elusive label. The question of who exactly were the Ranters and what they believed has occupied several historians whose work I will now examine here.

Contemporary accounts dating from the 1650s<sup>276</sup> have identified a number of men who have come to symbolise Ranter activity; activity alluded to in this rather colourful declaration from the title page of Abiezer Coppe’s *A Remonstrance of the Sincere and Zealous Protestation of Abiezer Coppe* :

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<sup>274</sup> Andrew Hopton, *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings* (London: Aporia Press) 1987, p. 5.

<sup>275</sup> For John Bunyan’s tracts against the Quakers, see T. L. Underwood and Roger Sharrock (eds.) *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan Volume I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1980.

<sup>276</sup> Often court reports or polemics accusing men of Ranter activity. See in particular *The Routing of the Ranters* as well as first-hand accounts from the accused: Clarkson’s *Lost Sheep Found* and Coppe’s *Fiery Flying Roll* both contain highly informative (and amusing) narratives that illustrate their treatment at the hands of the courts.

Some said He is a good man; others said, Nay but he is mad, and hath a devil. He is a wine-bibber, a glutton and a drunkard; a friend of publicans and harlots. But wisdom is justified of her children.<sup>277</sup>

Studies of the work of these individuals often reference the Ranters as a homogenous entity. That this might not be the case has fuelled a vocal debate concerning the origins and doctrines of the Ranter sect. The most engaging of these debates is that of such a group's actual existence. The publication of certain books and journal articles has led to a remarkable dialogue that energised studies of the period and has breathed new life into otherwise rather marginal texts. A recent study by Prasanta Chapravarty has reiterated the controversy surrounding the existence of a Ranter movement and has proved that the voices of men like Clarkson, Coppe, and their contemporaries still have a responsive audience today. The notion of there being 'a fascinating polemic as to the true nature of the Ranters'<sup>278</sup> suggests that the popular image of those extreme radical dissenters is one echoed in their critical reception over three hundred years after their actions were quashed. Chapravarty differentiates the Ranters – whom she refers to as 'a sectarian group' – from other dissenting factions like the Levellers by suggesting that rather than arguing for a new kind of political order (something that bound the other sects together), they were content to 'reconcile with their socially alienated status' which lends the group a passivity that is borne out by several texts that I shall study later in this chapter. The importance of this work is its assertion that the Ranters did form some sort of recognisable sect, a view that is at odds with a number of earlier critical studies that I will now consider.

By far the most strenuous refutation of the existence of a Ranter group is that posited by J. C. Davis who suggests:

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<sup>277</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Remonstrance of the Sincere and Zealous Protestation of Abiezer Coppe*, in Andrew Hopton (ed.), *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings*, p. 57.

<sup>278</sup> Prasanta Chakravarty, *"Like Parchment in the Fire": Literature and Radicalism in the English Civil War* (New York: Routledge) 2006, p. 157.

[The Ranters] were not so much a real religious movement, sect or group, made up of real men and women identifying themselves with particular beliefs and practices, but existed rather as a projection of the fears and anxieties of a broader society.<sup>279</sup>

Davis calls into question the view that the Ranters represented a unified political or religious movement and instead sees the actions and writing of men like Jacob Bauthumley, Abiezer Coppe, and Laurence Clarkson as ‘lacking the consistency of a group possessed of a shared ideology’.<sup>280</sup> His belief is that the Ranters existed only as a series of sensationalist second- and third-hand accounts, primarily in the popular press, and that the individuals concerned espoused no common doctrine<sup>281</sup>. This view of the Ranter group as being a symptom of a paranoid and rather inflammatory society would appear to confirm the assertion of Sim and Walker who point out the ‘rejection of external authority, and shift from a grand narrative to a little narrative consciousness, that we find in Ranterism’.<sup>282</sup> Those individuals tagged with the label ‘Ranter’ were dissenting from authoritain hegemony and were independent little narratives rather than an alternative movement like the Quakers or Levellers.

N. H. Keeble sees the Ranters as being one of a number of ‘amorphous groups’ (he lists them alongside Levellers, Diggers, Seekers and Fifth Monarchists) that, ‘were to disperse almost as quickly as they had come together in the 1640s’<sup>283</sup>. This view would seem to be at odds with that of Norman Cohn who reads the Ranters, and in particular, their writing, in relation to Free Spirit. He suggests Ranter literature is deserving of serious study, concluding that ‘the interest of the Ranter literature is not only historical. If the stylistic idiosyncrasies of Abiezer Coppe are sufficiently vigorous and colourful to earn him an

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<sup>279</sup> J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1986, p. x.

<sup>280</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>281</sup> In his ‘Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the Ranters’, *Past and Present* 129: 1, November 1990, Davis reiterates this point, stating that ‘We cannot believe everything that was said about “Quakers” in the seventeenth century, but... we [do] have independent evidence of a non-hostile kind as to its existence, organization, beliefs and history. Such evidence is lacking in the case of the “Ranters”’. (p. 84).

<sup>282</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 25.

<sup>283</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 12.

honourable place in the gallery of literary eccentrics, Joseph Salmon surely deserves recognition as a writer of real poetic power'.<sup>284</sup> Keeble's otherwise fascinating study of Revolutionary sectarian literature contains little that furthers our understanding of the Ranter texts (a single passing reference to Coppe, nothing at all pertaining to Clarkson or Salmon), but he does on several occasions mention a Ranter movement and it is obvious that he regards there to have been some sort of partially coherent group that warrants a label. Whereas Keeble's reading all but ignores the Ranters, A. L. Morton has devoted a book-length study to the movement including a chapter on Clarkson and a bibliographical note listing a number of key Ranter books and pamphlets. One of the strongest proponents of Ranter history, Morton puts forward an engaging and persuasive argument regarding the existence of a shared belief system in the works of Coppe, Clarkson, Joseph Salmon, and Jacob Bauthumley. His study concentrates on the work of men often publishing in isolation and yet preaching similar doctrine under similarly extraordinary circumstances. That said, he is wary enough of the controversy surrounding the movement to suggest caution when referring to any kind of Ranter 'sect': 'It would probably be incorrect to speak of the Ranters as a Church, or even as a sect. There is no evidence for any formal organisation or generally received body of doctrine'.<sup>285</sup> It is more likely, he contends, that the term 'Ranter' was applied to a body of men whose religious teaching fell outside that of even the most left-wing radical sects and as a result the idea of these individuals belonging to one 'church' would be entirely misleading. He instead identifies a number of polemicists whose doctrine amounts to an informal sharing of ideas.

Sharing Morton's view of the Ranters, Christopher Hill has written a number of books that explore the history and ideas of the English Revolution. His *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* provides a detailed study of many

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<sup>284</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin) 1970, pp. 287-288.

<sup>285</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 92.

sectarian religious groups and includes important research into the writings of the primary proponents of Ranter doctrine. Hill's work is notable for its Marxist-informed theoretical model and this seems particularly suited to studies of the likes of Coppe and Winstanley in whose work can be seen a form of proto-communism. Of particular note is Hill's assertion that radical nonconformism in the wake of the Civil Wars has resonance today, and that the Ranters in particular share ideas with contemporary thought: 'Now that the protestant ethic itself, the greatest achievement of European bourgeois society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is at last being questioned after a rule of three or four centuries, we can study with a new sympathy the Diggers, the Ranters, and the many other daring thinkers who in the seventeenth century refused to bow down and worship it'.<sup>286</sup> Hill is clear in his assertion that there was no definite Ranter sect but nevertheless groups a number of individuals together as espousing the kind of theories that led to accusations of 'Ranting'. As he puts it: 'There are very wide discrepancies between the theology of men like Salmon and Bauthumley, on the one hand, and the licentious practices of which rank-and-file Ranters were accused'.<sup>287</sup>

In *Milton and the English Revolution*, Hill identifies the Ranter tendency of Biblical criticism, citing Laurence Clarkson in particular whose writing alludes to 'the contradictions and inconsistencies to be found in the bible'.<sup>288</sup> This attack on what Hill describes as 'sacrosanct authority' represents a more dangerous aspect of Ranter belief. Material that shook faith, or at the very least sowed doubt in that faith, in the one unifying text that radical Protestants had could have weakened parliament's position against the Catholics – a shared fear that again held other sects in check. This, coupled with Coppe's repeated warnings of

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<sup>286</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 15.

<sup>287</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>288</sup> Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber) 1977, p. 248.

imminent class revolt (and he was not the only portent of social revolution) goes some way to explain the fear some of these characters must have engendered:

Thus saith the Lord,

Kings, Princes, Lords, great ones, must bow to the poorest Peasants; rich men must stoop to poor rogues, or else they'l rue for it.

This must be done two waies.

You shall have one short dark hint.<sup>289</sup>

In another book of major interest to readers of nonconformist revolutionary writing, Hill concentrates upon the Ranters' influence on John Bunyan<sup>290</sup> and equates their ideas with those of atheism. This is something which Bunyan hints at in *Grace Abounding* and especially *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, and it is easy to draw parallels with the argument set down by Bunyan and the accusations levelled at Clarkson, Coppe, and others. As Hill notes, 'Mr Badman is an atheist... Badman's mockery of his wife's religion looks back to the Ranters, especially his daring speculations about the Bible'.<sup>291</sup> So the questioning of a belief system (a quality Clarkson displays seven times in his spiritual autobiography by coming into conflict with, and leaving, seven different sects) is assumed to be a sign of spiritual weakness; anything less than an unswerving faith in any given Church is taken as a show of atheistic tendencies. Church and religion are for society in general one and the same, the notion of spirituality independent of an organised belief system is as alien as it is suspicious.

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<sup>289</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, p. 47.

<sup>290</sup> In his polemical *Some Gospel-Truths Opened*, Bunyan leaves no doubt as to his opinion of both Ranters (whom he at least saw as an homogenous entity) and Quakers: 'those commonly called *Familists*, *Ranters*, *Quakers* or others, who... either deny Christ to be a real man without them, blasphemously fancying him to be only God manifest in their flesh; or else make his humane nature with the fulnesse of the Godhead in it.' *Miscellaneous Works Volume I*, p. 7.

<sup>291</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 232.

John Stachniewski reads the Ranters against a culture of persecution that draws upon the Calvinism at the heart of radical Protestant teaching. His *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* identifies the importance of language – especially in its written form – and its application by sectaries of all beliefs as a tool for overcoming authoritarian pressure. Language is seen to be the dominant method of spiritual enforcement, one that was deployed by all sides: ‘It was language primarily, the Ranters realized, that oppressed them. Their exhilarated emancipation took the form of inverting and abusing the language of Calvinism in order to scramble its concepts. It was an admirable exercise in bravura’.<sup>292</sup> This is also an exercise in deconstructive rewriting on the one hand and a fine example of the deployment of the svelte technique: to overcome adversity by avoiding the sort of conflict that Lyotard would see as a differend and instead using subtlety not in order to dominate an enemy but rather to coexist with or even to subvert it. To quote Abiezer Coppe in his *Second Fiery Flying Roule*,

The word of the Lord came expressly to me, saying, write, write, write. And ONE stood by me, and pronounced all these words to me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in this paper.

This kind of dissent is also a major factor in Clarkson’s writing, something I want to read more closely later in this chapter.

For these critics then, the men and women known as Ranters had little in common beyond a vaguely shared ideology of individualism and the misfortune to be accused (often with good reason) of similar blasphemous or else ‘improper’ acts. They are portrayed here as itinerant wanderers whose faith belonged to no church but their own and their apparent anarchic politics often masked a deeper sense of pacifism or at least passivity. Was this a

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<sup>292</sup> John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1991, p. 159.

sign of burgeoning apathy – prefiguring the political climate of the early twenty-first century – or rather a defiant show of strength of character, a willingness to postmodernise received authority and empower the little narratives of the individual Self?

It might be worthwhile to consider here also the etymology of the word ‘Ranter’ and its derivatives if we are to understand the history of its use in relation to certain radicalised sectarians. The Oxford English dictionary offers the following in its entry on the verb, to rant: (1.) use bombastic language, (2.) declaim, recite theatrically, (3.) speak vehemently or wildly, (4.) preach noisily; each of these definitions would seem to epitomise the popular image of the Ranter individual. Works like *A Fiery Flying Roll* or *A Rout A Rout* contain much that could be described as ‘vehement’ and ‘bombastic’ as this passage ably illustrates:

But behold, behold, he is now risen with a witnesse to, to save *Zion* with vengeance, or to confound and plague all things unto himself; who by his mighty Angell is proclaiming (with a loud voyce) That Sin and Transgression is finished and ended; and everlasting righteousness brought in; and the everlasting Gospell preaching; Which everlasting Gospell is brought in with most terrible earth-quakes, and heaven-quakes, and with signes and wonders following. *Amen.*<sup>293</sup>

As well as an aptitude for rhetoric, those men we now call Ranters certainly possessed a sense of theatricality and charm especially when in conflict with any form of authority, evidenced here by Laurence Clarkson during one of several appearances he made before a court:

Nay further, it is reported, that which of them you liked best, you lay with her in the water? Surely your experience teacheth you the contrary, that nature hath small desire to copulation in water, at which they laughed; But, said I, you have more cause to weep for the unclean thoughts of your heart.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, p. 16.

<sup>294</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 15.



This easy manner reflects no doubt the doctrine practiced by these individuals, something that was admitted freely:

‘I pleaded the words of *Paul*, *That I know and am perswaded by the Lord Jesus, that there was nothing unclean, but as man esteemed it*, unfolding that was intended all acts, as well as meats and drinks, and therefore till you can lie with all women as one woman, and not judge it a sin, you can do nothing but sin: now in scripture I found a perfection spoken of, so that I understood no man could attain perfection but this way, at which Mr. *Rawlinson* was much taken, and *Sarah Kullin* being then present, did invite me to make trial of what I had expressed so as I take it, after we parted.<sup>295</sup>

I shall examine the writing of and the response to Laurence Clarkson in greater detail later in this chapter, but it is worthwhile here to note the effect this kind of extreme radicalism had on political authority and Clarkson’s own treatment is certainly illustrative of this. His activities eventually drew the attention of Parliament and he was arrested.

Critical writing on the Ranters has, as I have demonstrated, in the main come to a consensus regarding the existence of the sect: that there was no organised Ranter movement, rather a disparate conglomerate of individuals whose doctrines shared certain qualities with one another. Although some writers – Norman Cohn being the most strident proponent here – stress the differences between and the isolation in which men like Clarkson and Coppe operated, most contend that in the eyes of contemporary authorities and the population in general Ranters were identifiable through their actions. Although popularly exaggerated by the courts as much as anyone else these actions included bigamy, public nudity, blasphemy, and political dissent. The disparity of doctrine was matched by massively different social background. Some like Coppe attended university, others were very much ‘mechanick preachers’, men who could identify with their audience in ways that a wealthy, government-sponsored clergy could never do.

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p. 25-26.

The Ranters appear then to have been men from the very fringes of a marginal and extremely radical left wing. Nevertheless, popular support came from an enthusiastic urban populace which had become disillusioned by the Civil Wars, and these men enjoyed periods of success and to a certain extent fame, due to the tone and enthusiasm not just of their preaching, but of their writing. The eloquence of their doctrine coupled with their appeal for the mobilization of the ‘meanest sort’ made them as dangerous, although nowhere near as organised, as the Levellers, and the methods with which they were silenced almost approached the severity meted out to that sect. Leading Ranters like Coppe were imprisoned and forced to recant their beliefs and, as Morton concludes, ‘The combination of legal prohibition, police repression and adverse propaganda in the last months of 1650 and the first of 1651 did not destroy the Ranter movement, but it certainly checked its growth, drove it underground and forced it to shun rather than court public notice’<sup>296</sup>.

Ultimately, for the population of England during the middle decades of the seventeenth century, Ranters were political and religious agitators, men with dangerous ideas but whose isolation meant that no organised sect ever really appeared. Their philosophy, their world view, was strikingly postmodern in its distrust of grand narratives and impatience with the nonconformist sectarian movement – John Stachniewski has pointed out ‘Ranterism’s heady deconstruction of Protestant religion’<sup>297</sup> – and the fact that they still drew the majority of their audience from a working class demographic is startling.

## **Ranter Writing**

In order to understand fully the motivations of men like Clarkson it is important to examine some of the texts that were the cause of so much controversy and so I shall now provide a

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<sup>296</sup> A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 107.

<sup>297</sup> John Stachniewski, ‘Introduction’, *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p .xxxviii.

brief survey of some of the key Ranter texts and offer some suggestions as to how these books shared certain key ideas and doctrine and how they relate to the writing of other religious sects.

The Ranters emerged out of the chaos of the English Revolution. In many ways the small number of individuals labelled as Ranters were a strong embodiment of the little narrative, working in isolation under threat of popular and authoritarian censure; as Richard L. Greaves has written, ‘Ranters are most accurately understood as eccentric dissidents who questioned traditional beliefs about sin, hell, and Scripture, but did not constitute a sectarian group’.<sup>298</sup> Like many members of the emerging radical sects, they were to prosper in the culture of religious toleration of the 1640s and 50s only to be silenced by an outraged political and religious authority a few years later. Most of their number has been forgotten and few of their published pamphlets reached a second edition but a few individuals have endured and the work of Abiezer Coppe in particular has come to define the ideology of the entire movement. Born in Warwick in May 1619, Abiezer Coppe rose to a level of infamy as early as 1636 when he was at All-Souls College at Oxford where, according to one account, Coppe ‘would several times entertain for one night, or more, a wanton huswife in his chamber to whom carrying several times meat, at the hour of refection, he would make answer, when being asked by the way what he would do with it, that “it was a bit for his cat”’.<sup>299</sup> Hardly remarkable behaviour for a University undergraduate at the time but nevertheless, this kind of anecdote (however unreliable) provides an early glimpse if not of Coppe’s later activities then at least an indication of how he was perceived and remembered by others. Of his life before Oxford there is little extant aside from the spiritual remembrances of his own writings.

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<sup>298</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent*, p. 68.

<sup>299</sup> Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss (London, 1815) pp. 959-62 in Andrew Hopton, *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings*, p. 8.

Coppe's spiritual awakening seems to have occurred in his thirteenth year and, like Clarkson, he appears to have wandered from church to church in search of 'the wayes of truth'. In a relatively unremarkable early life (as far as that was possible given the political and religious turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century) Coppe left university at the outbreak of the Civil War and joined the Presbyterian Church. As Andrew Hopton has written though, Coppe, again, like Clarkson, soon became unhappy among the Presbyterians and 'later he became an Anabaptist. He gained a considerable reputation as an Anabaptist preacher in the Warwick area (where, according to Wood he "baptized seven thousand people as he brag'd to some Oxford scholars")'.<sup>300</sup> Dissatisfaction with the methods of a given Church is not a quality unique to the ranks of the Ranters. Movement between Churches is often seen as a precursor to the conversion experience in spiritual autobiography and it is usually during a sustained period of doubt, despair, and sinful behaviour that religious discontent occurs. In perhaps the most affecting example of spiritual itinerancy, John Bunyan describes the ease with which his faith is driven out (as a result of both secular and spiritual influence) and then resurrected in a cyclical pattern of psychological struggle:

I fell in company with one poor man that made profession of Religion; who, as I then thought, did talk pleasantly of Religion: wherefore falling into some love and liking to what he said, I betook me to my Bible, and began to take great pleasure in reading... Wherefore I fell to some outward Reformation, both in my words and life, and did set the Commandments before me for my way to Heaven: which Commandments I also did strive to keep; and, as I thought, did keep them pretty well sometimes, and then I should have comfort; yet now and then should break one, and so afflict my Conscience; but then I should repent, and say I was sorry for it, and promise God to do better next time, and there get help again, for then I thought I pleased God as well as any man in *England*.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>301</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 12.

The ease with which Bunyan falls under the spell of one who ‘made profession of Religion’ is indicative of the mood of discontentment the author is suffering and is symptomatic of his increasingly fluctuating mental state. There is something childlike about Bunyan’s sentiment here – the notion of promising to do better next time, the keeping of the Commandments ‘pretty well sometimes’ – and it is easy to see the power that headstrong religious zealots and dashing sectaries might have over such vulnerable individuals. This delicacy would seem to explain the ease with which men like Coppe, Clarkson, Salmon, and the more extreme ‘visionary’ thinkers like Anna Trapnel were able to court large numbers of people despite the hostility arrayed against them. Uncertainty of this kind appears to symbolise the juvenilia of the sectarian experience for members of the more established sects like the Baptists, the kind of ‘phases’ an individual would be expected to have grown out of by the time of their spiritual maturity. For Coppe and others though, spiritual uncertainty follows them into adulthood and in the case of Laurence Clarkson in particular, is never satisfactorily resolved. The naivety inherent in even the most radical Ranter doctrine must have appealed to a similarly naïve – or at least, exhausted and disillusioned – section of society. Indeed, the fact that most Ranter activity was based around the poorer urban towns and cities that would still be reeling from the upheavals of the previous two decades suggests that the prospective Ranter audience might have been rather malleable when it came to spiritual matters.

The power of Ranter doctrine (as well as its legacy) comes from its writing. While anecdotes abound concerning the illicit activities of the nonconformist underground, it is in the writing of Salmon, Bauthumley, and especially Abiezer Coppe, that the promises of radical Calvinist Puritanism are given form. By 1660, the tradition of Puritan prose writing had developed to the extent that, as N. H. Keeble notes, ‘it set the virtues of clarity, simplicity and plainness against the rhetorical excess of Euphuism, the luxuriance of ‘tropical’ romance styles, the syntactical sophistication of Ciceronianism and the erudite ingenuity of the

metaphysicals<sup>302</sup>. The fact remains of course that, Coppe aside, few sectarian writers would have been exposed to this kind of literary tradition and as a result, their work reflected the everyday speech of the working population. Here is Joseph Salmon addressing the Army:

Those that live in the more pure knowledge and Life of God, see themselves (their Lives, Liberties, and all outward enjoyments) not their own, but the Lords, and theirs in the Lord, not a jot below him, or at the least distance from him.

If we have the Lord, we have enough, because he is all to us, and we the same fulnesse in him: Lo, this is life, libertie, and satisfaction.<sup>303</sup>

Keep in mind that the Ranter audience would have consisted of a mainly semi-literate population and their work would most likely have been received aurally (as sermons and the like) rather than in a printed form. The plain style of the Ranters retains its power because of, rather than in spite of, these clear, unrefined qualities. As well as this, there was a popular movement against a university-educated clergy, towards ‘poor, illiterate, mechanic men’ more in keeping with the philosophical climate of the post-revolutionary years – Cromwell’s Protectorate, The New Model Army. As Keeble has written, ‘The corollary of this in radical thought was not that education is no alternative to, or substitute for, spiritual vocation, but that it is antipathetical to it’<sup>304</sup>.

Coppe’s writing is insistent and positively boils with fervour. The clauses are truncated, almost breathlessly so, and share almost nothing stylistically with the measured eloquence of John Bunyan. His writing is as radical as his beliefs. Coppe’s most important work, *A Fiery Flying Roll: A Word from the Lord to all the Great Ones of the Earth, whom this may concerne: Being the last WARNING PIECE at the dreadful day of JUDGEMENT*, is

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<sup>302</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 240.

<sup>303</sup> Joseph Salmon, *A Rout, A Rout*, in Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Junction Books) 1983, p. 15.

<sup>304</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 163.

a powerful indictment of authority, one that saw its author arrested and work burned. Its sympathies lie with Winstanley and the Leveller movement, sharing a common egalitarian message although in Coppe's vision, the ensuing revolution takes on a more Biblical (Revelatory) impetus:

The Eternal God, the mighty Leveller is comming, yea come, even at the doore; and what will you do in that day. Repent, repent, repent, Bow down, bow down, bow down, or howle, reigne, or be damned; Bow downe, bow downe, you sturdy Oakes, and Cedars, bow downe. (p.26)

This is the crux of Ranter doctrine. The violence of the writing mirrors the frustration of its writer and it is this sense of frustration that leads Clarkson in particular into acute spiritual uncertainty and forces him to adopt a svelte approach to dissent. Davis sees Coppe as writing with an agenda, that his text is a calculated exercise rather than a spiritual outburst:

The language of *A Fiery Flying Roll* is deliberately startling. It is meant to communicate the urgency of an imminent divine coming, both inward and outward in its effects, which are not so much immediately comforting as unsettling, disturbing and overturning. In addition, Coppe had to impress upon his readers the awesome, distracting legitimacy of his own prophetic role. There is accordingly a good deal of semantic athleticism about the work, but it would be a confusion to suggest that there is anything of the mystical about it.<sup>305</sup>

If Coppe, and by extension other so-called Ranters, was a rational agitator then such a calculated approach to dissent is more than suggestive of a svelte solution to an established grand narrative; this would not lessen the radical sense of the Ranter doctrine(s), it would reinforce the svelte nature of the Ranter writer.

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<sup>305</sup> J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 51.

Jacob Bauthumley assumes a measured tone in his *The Light and Dark Sides of God* in which he espouses classic Ranter thought – or at least ideas traditionally associated with Ranterism – in prose less vitriolic, but no less effective, compared to that of Coppe:

For neither the evill act or the good act are evill or good, as they are acts; and men can no more do evill then they can do good, as they call it: which may answer that common Objection that men make.

That if this be so, men may drink, swear, and be profane, and live as they list.

And I answer further, the sin lies not in these outward acts, for a man my do the self-same act, and yet not sin: that is, that a man drinks to excess, there is sin, that a man drinks for necessity or delight, the same act and posture of body is put out in the one, as the other: And so I might instance in the rest, so that sin is from within.<sup>306</sup>

Here we see the diverse nature of Ranter prose. Bauthumley also makes skilful use of an autobiographical style in *The Light and Dark Sides of God* in which the repetitive use of ‘I’ and ‘me’ lends the writing a more subjective, reflective quality quite dissimilar from Coppe’s caustic attack. ‘And therefore whatsoever I speak or write of thee, it is from thy writing and speaking in me’<sup>307</sup> he writes in an almost confessional style that prefigures to an extent the more fully realized autobiographical account of Clarkson’s *Lost Sheep Found*. Coppe as well adopts an air of autobiography in *A Fiery Flying Roll* to reflect upon the notions of sin and hypocrisy:

And barren, demure *Mical* thinks (for I know her heart saith the Lord) that I chose base things when I sate downe and eat and drank around on the ground with Gypseys, and clip’t, hug’d and kiss’d them, putting my hand in their bosomes, loving the she-Gypsies dearly. O base! Saith mincing *Mical*, the least spark of modesty would be as red as crimson or scarlet, to hear this.

I warrent me, *Mical* could better have borne this if I had done it to Ladies: so I can for a need, if it be my will, and that in the height of honour and majesty, without sin. But at that time when I was hugging the Gipsies, I abhorred the thoughts of Ladies, their

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<sup>306</sup> Jacob Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, in Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings*, p. 244.

<sup>307</sup> *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, p. 231.



beauty could not bewitch mine eyes, or snare my lips, or intangle my hands in their bosomes; yet I can if it be my will, kiss and hug Ladies, and love my neighbours wife as my selfe, without sin.<sup>308</sup>

These divergent writing styles add credence to the belief that no Ranter sect existed but the shared sentiment, the obsessively internalized spirituality, and the insistent antinomian message of these texts all point to a conglomeration of little narratives entering into continual differends with authority in the wake of the legitimation crisis of the 1650s. The next section will expand on this briefly and I will then turn to Laurence Clarkson's spiritual autobiography and, having contextualized an example of extreme radical dissension in relation to little narratives and their impact on authority, will then go on to interrogate the themes of *Lost Sheep Found* against this nonconformist backdrop.

### **The Ranters and their Ideas**

Fervent displays of so-called Ranter doctrine understandably led to conflict with authority. Coppe's *A Fiery Flying Roll* was famously burned and he himself imprisoned at Newgate on charges of blasphemy, while Joseph Salmon was arrested in 1650 'accused of decrying all forms whatsoever, by allegorizing the scriptures'<sup>309</sup>. Clarkson himself was arrested for Ranter activity in Bishopsgate after the most blatant example of entrapment; the following passage goes some way to illustrate the ends to which Ranters were both feared and persecuted by both the law and the general populace:

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<sup>308</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule*, in Andrew Hopton (ed.), *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings*, p. 44.

<sup>309</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 218.

In the interim the parliament had issued forth several Warrents into the hands of Church-members, which knew me not by person, but by name, so could not take me, though several times met with me, that at last the Parliament to him that could bring me before them, would give a hundred pounds, so that one *Jones* for lucre of mony, knowing me, got a warrant to apprehend me, who meeting me in the four swans within *Bishopsgate*, told me he had a warrant from the High Court of Parliament to take me: Let me see it, said I, you have no power to serve it without an Officer, and so would have escaped, but could not the people so thronged about me, and a great tumult there was.<sup>310</sup>

This kind of persecution was hardly uncommon among the sects but Ranters appear to have earned their name on the strength of popular suspicion and all of the leading figures were to fall foul of the law at least once.

Popular suspicion often has basis in truth and there are countless reports by witnesses of every persuasion that confirm or at least hint at some or all of the charges brought against individuals. Christopher Hill quotes the former Ranter Edward Burrough who wrote in his *A Trumpet of the Lord Sounded out of Sion* that ‘the Ranters “have scorned self-righteousness”; their house had once been the house of prayer, though now it has become “the den of robbers”, cultivating false peace, false liberty and love and fleshly joy’<sup>311</sup>. Similarly, Clarkson’s own writing states in tones that betray no sense of shame or wrong doing that his own doctrine of Antinomianism involves practices that are clearly at odds with those who convict him. This is classic Ranter thought and is surely the kind of sentiment John Bunyan wanted to distance himself from and also explains his strenuous detestation of those who followed similar doctrine.

Although Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography is notable for its accounts of uncertainty and spiritual doubt, the notion that Ranter literature could sway the opinions of such a

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<sup>310</sup> Lawrence Clarkson, *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 29.

<sup>311</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 238.

staunchly upright character is an enduring one. It shows that such literature had some elements that would appeal to or at least sow some doubt in less radical readers. But then the Ranters did aim their doctrine at the ‘meanest sort’. Their popularity was highest in densely populated urban areas, in the towns and cities and among the less educated where as Hill notes: ‘In the hands of men and women simpler and less theologically sophisticated, especially in this time of revolutionary crisis, [Ranter] teachings were easily pushed over into Antinomianism, a sense of liberation from all bonds and restraints of law and morality’.<sup>312</sup> As an example of this we might consider Coppe’s *A Fiery Flying Roll* which reads somewhat like a manifesto for the judgement of those who oppress the poor; the excitement in his writing is palpable:

Behold, behold, I have told you. Take it to heart, else you’l repent every veine of your heart. For your own sakes take heed. Its my last warning. For the cryes of the poore, for the oppression of the needy. For the horrid insolency of proud man, who will dare to sit in my throne, and judge unrighteous judgement. Who will dare to touch mine Annoynted, and do my Prophets harme. For these things sake (now) am I arrisen, saith the Lord.<sup>313</sup>

Since Bunyan was often at pains to identify himself with the working men of Bedford, it is hardly surprising that extreme Antinomian teaching reached him and that he was, to some extent, to become seduced by it. Many writers and public figures passed through the Ranter ranks only to emerge as an Anabaptist, Quaker, or Muggletonian; few however, reviled the former movement with such fervour. Writing with hindsight and after defending himself against a number of potentially damaging events,<sup>314</sup> Bunyan goes on to quash any suggestion that he fell in with Ranters or their supporters, concluding in no uncertain terms that he

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>313</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, p. 31.

<sup>314</sup> As well as accusations of Ranting, Bunyan had to weather the scandal that surrounded his relationship with a female member of his congregation. Although Agnes Beaumont records the innocence of the matter in her own spiritual autobiography, neither party was able to exorcise fully the popular stigma that surrounded the event.

abominated ‘those cursed principles’. Whether this is Bunyan’s own shifting sympathy or, as is more likely, a response to the popular disdain of their doctrine, is open to debate but the Ranters provoked in Bunyan such outbursts otherwise reserved for the Quakers. In both instances we see Bunyan involving himself in a wider dogmatic clash at a subjective level; in his opening broadside against Edward Burrough in *A Vindication of the Book Called Some Gospel-Truths Opened*, for example, Bunyan enters in to a personal slanging match in an attempt to deflect criticisms levelled at his anti-Quaker writing:

There is a very great number of heresies cunningly vented by him, and also many things there falsely reported of me; which things in this discourse I shall very plainly discover, and the way that I shall take, shall bee First, by laying down some of thy expressions, and also some of mine; and by inquiring into the truth of one, and the error of the other, through the assistance of the Spirit of CHRIST, and according to the Scriptures.<sup>315</sup>

So the accusations made against those espousing Ranter doctrine were not entirely unfounded; but what was the motivation behind such extreme dissent and who were the leading voices? One of many obscure proponents of the antinomian left, John Saltmarsh is one of a handful whose written legacy defines that social group. His *Free Grace: or the Flowing of Christs Blood freely to Sinners*, written in 1645, is an early expression of what came to be Ranterism. In it Saltmarsh remoulds classic predestination and sets shocking precedents. Again, Morton writes:

Rejecting the Calvinist doctrine of election by which in practice salvation was reserved for a tiny minority of the human race, Saltmarsh argued that the grace of God, freely available to all, not only offers them the prospect of salvation in the world to come but sets them free from the bondage of the moral law in this.<sup>316</sup>

This democratic approach to the prospects of salvation was by no means infallible and in the case of Saltmarsh at least is more the result of personal spiritual crisis and a means of

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<sup>315</sup> *A Vindication of Some Gospel Truths Opened*, in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan I*, p. 135.

<sup>316</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 50.

reconciling individual doubt with the perceived grand narrative of faith. In *Free Grace* we find a man suffering periods of extreme depression as a result of his sense of uncertainty with established religion:

I was tempted to *make away myself*, least the longer I lived, the more I should dishonour Religion. Satan came again to me, to eat something with pins in it, to choak myself, that it might not appear how I died, which I did, but in mercy found no harm; the Lord prevented it, I know not how...<sup>317</sup>

Saltmarsh's later Antinomian doctrine constitutes a highly subjective method of coping with an insurmountable spiritual barrier, a method exemplified in the figure of Laurence Clarkson in his *Lost Sheep Found*.

### **The Lost Sheep Found**

Born in Preston in 1615, Laurence Clarkson (or Claxton) was brought up in orthodox Anglican surroundings; an apparently unremarkable beginning hardly indicative of the turbulent dissent that was to mark his adulthood. Dissatisfaction with this doctrine and his father's insistence that he read *The Book of Common Prayer* and Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety* led the young man to attend meetings of other Churches in secret. Davis refers to Clarkson as 'a strikingly idiosyncratic individual'<sup>318</sup> and the events Clarkson records in his spiritual autobiography would seem to justify this appraisal.

As is the case with many of the dissenting spiritual autobiographies, little in the way of substantial biographical material regarding Clarkson's upbringing can be gleaned from *The Lost Sheep Found*. No record is extant of Clarkson's life before 1630 and no mention is made of his parents or ancestry. He is dismissive of this upbringing, indicating he was

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<sup>317</sup> John Saltmarsh, *Free Grace*, in A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 47.

<sup>318</sup> J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 95.

‘educated in the Form and Worship of the Church of *England*, then established in the Title of *Episcopal*, or Bishops Government’.<sup>319</sup> There is a suggestion of the kind of early inquisitiveness also seen in Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, a discontent with hegemonic religious authority that drives the individual to seek spiritual fulfilment with the nonconformists. This drive is one of the more moving elements of Clarkson’s narrative. The young writer is shown to overcome what must have been an overwhelming spiritual and political authority in order to worship a very personal god:

Then, and in that year, my heart began to enquire after the purest Ministry held forth under that Form, not being altogether void of some small differing, who preached Christ more truly and powerfully, as I thought, than another, and unto them was I only resolved to follow their Doctrine above any other.<sup>320</sup>

The drive to attain not only individual salvation in the Puritan tradition, but more importantly to commit to the search for an ideal method of worship, the ‘purest Ministry’ as Clarkson puts it, necessitates the adoption of a flexible, svelte approach to faith and leads him into the meandering trek through the nonconformist wilderness he records in his spiritual autobiography.

Clarkson’s *Lost Sheep Found* was published in 1660 and describes the years 1640 onwards in great detail. In those twenty years Clarkson passes through and gives written testimonial about no less than seven nonconformist sects providing first-hand insight into religious life during the revolutionary period. This spiritual itinerancy lends massive importance to the study of a writer otherwise overshadowed by fellow Ranter, Abiezer Coppe. The narrative is written in a style that reflects both his background and his aspirations although Christopher Hill seemingly ignores this fact in his *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People* when he states that ‘That perceptive critic Alick West pointed

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<sup>319</sup> *Lost Sheep Found* p. 4.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

out that few books before *Grace Abounding* speak so energetically in the first person singular. Montaigne perhaps: but none addressed by a mechanic to his fellow artisans.<sup>321</sup> This kind of oversight ignores the impact of Clarkson's delivery and his engaging appeal to the like-minded:

...a man of no mean parts nor Parentage in the Reasons kingdom, much importuned me to publish to this perishing world, the various leadings forth of my spirit through each Dispensation, from the year 1630, to this year 1660, and that for no other end, than that Reason, or the Devils mouth might be stopped, with the hypocrisie of his heart laid naked...

Clarkson's prose is conversational. It is possessed of an easy familiarity – more so even than Bunyan – and lacks any sense of the stilted Puritanical piety often seen in the confessional writing of the mid-seventeenth century. Morton's observation that 'it is written with an extraordinary frankness and with a fullness of vivid detail which throws much light on the inner life of the sects' underlines its importance both as a document of radical sects and as an honest account of the place of the individual in the dissenting community. The text is in fact so far removed from Old Testament vitriol that it must be wondered why Clarkson is still relatively obscure.

Spiritually unsatisfied with Anglicanism, Clarkson sets out on a journey, 'through many Religious Countreys,' in an attempt to find one true church and 'perfect cure and peace in my soul'. By the outbreak of Civil War in 1642, Clarkson was in London and had fallen in with Presbyterians: 'So war being begun betwixt the Episcopal and the Presbyterian, I came for London, where I found them more precise than in our Popish Countrey of Lancashire.'<sup>322</sup> Clarkson's role in the conflict remains somewhat unclear although he does record some telling observations

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<sup>321</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 66.

<sup>322</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 7.

I remained a hearer of them [Presbyterian Ministers] till such time as that Wars began to be hot, and they pressed the people to send out their husbands and servants to help the Lord against the Mighty, by which many a poor soul knowing no better, was murdered, and murdered others, taking the Bible in their Pockets, and the Covenant in their Hats.<sup>323</sup>

This is suggestive of pacifism or at the very least displays a highly cynical view of the mechanics of warfare and Clarkson is obviously aware of the human impact of the conflict which he weighs up against the wider picture; indeed, his reasons for eventually leaving the Presbyterian Church might confirm this view: ‘but this I observed, that as the Presbyterians got power, so their pride and cruelty increased against such as was contrary to them.’<sup>324</sup> This plea for democracy ultimately leads Clarkson into a brief sojourn with Independency, ‘a Doctrine clearer, and of a more moderate spirit’.

Having first identified and then fled an environment of ‘wickedness’ rather than describe, as Bunyan did, a personally sinful past, Clarkson effectively removes himself into a more spiritual place in order to ‘get affurance of Salvation’. He describes ‘our Popifs Countrey of Lancashire’ as being ‘highly profaned by the toleration of May-poles, Dancing and Rioting’ that resembles John Bunyan’s recollection of his early life in *Grace Abounding*:

... from a childe, that I had but few Equals, (especially considering my years, which were tender, being few) both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God. (p.6) ... I shook the Sermon out of my mind, and to my old custom of sports and gaming I returned with great delight. p. 10

Bunyan is at pains to confess his own sinful tendencies, not those of his society. Clarkson’s is a more impersonal appraisal of sin, a less subjective one – one that can be passively avoided rather than having to be positively overcome. Predestination and the spiritual

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<sup>323</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>324</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.



turmoil it caused tended to be a subjective process. As Hill suggests, ‘In Protestantism the sense of sin was internalised. Priestly mediators were discarded because each believer had a priest in his own conscience: outward penance and absolution were replaced by inward penitence.’<sup>325</sup> Clarkson’s reading of predestination is more pragmatic. His *Journey through many Religious Countreys* involves a succession of spiritual conversions followed by periods of soul searching and discontentment. This discontentment is not internalised though, Clarkson is rather at odds with each sect he comes into contact with. His search is – unlike Bunyan, say – for the right method of spiritual expression, not for evidence of his own spirituality. For Hill, this lack of faith in the church(es) was partly a result of a general breakdown in confidence of both law and morality: ‘it is hardly surprising that men and women, faced with an unprecedented freedom of choice, passed rapidly from sect to sect, trying all things, finding all of them wanting.’<sup>326</sup> Freedom of choice is a concept embraced by Clarkson who turns a particularly postmodern phrase when he writes:

... consider what variety of By-paths, and multiplicity of seeming realities, yet absolute notions, the souls of the Elect may wander or travel through, seeking rest, and yet find none till the day unexpected, that Soul as a brand be plucked out of the fire of his own righteousness, or professed wickedness, unto the true belief of a real Commission which quencheth all the fiery darts of sin.

Clarkson sounds here like a man adapting to the attentions of conflicting little narratives despite coveting the ‘absolute notions’ of true faith. This dichotomy brings about a differend that Clarkson not only accepts but actively immerses himself within, turning circumstance and even serendipity into his own soteriological search in an act of dissent that raises doubt as to the authority of predestinarian doctrine.

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<sup>325</sup> Christopher Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 152.

<sup>326</sup> *ibid*, p. 190.

### Showing svelteness in *Lost Sheep Found*

In his 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question', Jean-Francois Lyotard posits that the individual's aptitude for 'metamorphic capacity' – one's 'svelteness' – is an essential element in the rejection of grand narratives. Stuart Sim has written that svelteness involves 'a flexibility of response on the part of individuals that is essentially foreign to the world of grand narrative, where rules and regulations dictate prescribed patterns of public behaviour',<sup>327</sup> and it is Laurence Clarkson's flexibility of response to the spiritual demands of the 'weary Journey through many Religious Countreys' he writes about in *Lost Sheep Found* that I intend to interrogate closely here.

*The Lost Sheep Found* shows Clarkson to have experienced a great deal of spiritual doubt and soul-searching. The 'variety of By-paths, and multiplicity of seeming realities' through which the elect 'may wander or travel through' are, Clarkson suggests, all dispensations through which the prospective saint must travel. Clarkson is essentially alluding to the negotiation of little narratives conspiring against the grand narrative of true belief – what he refers to as his 'Fathers house' – anticipating Bunyan's 'Slough of Despond' or Doubting Castle that threaten to ensnare Christian and Faithful in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Where *Lost Sheep Found* differs somewhat from Bunyan's allegory is in its lack of a visible grand narrative, a 'shining light or 'straight path' against which to judge these competing little narratives. It is perhaps because of this that Clarkson reverts for a time to blind faith in what he later identifies as the hypocrisy of the 'Bishops Government':

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<sup>327</sup> Stuart Sim, *Jean-Francois Lyotard* (London: Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf) 1996, p. 91.

The more I laboured for perfect cure and peace in my soul, the further I was from it, insomuch that I was resolved to seek forth no more, supposing myself in as perfect health and liberty in my spirit, as any then professing an unknown God whatsoever.<sup>328</sup>

The key word here is ‘resolved’; his resolution to attain a ‘perfect cure’ is stifled by the oppressive, average piety of the Church of England. Clarkson pays lip service to this form of worship and for a time engages with it without conviction:

I thought it conscience to obey God before men; however I being under my fathers tuition, he cast a strict eye over me, and would force me to read over the prayers in the book of *Common-prayer* and *Practice of Piety*, which I have done, till they have fallen asleep and my self.<sup>329</sup>

Clarkson’s quiet dissent, he is after all willing to concede for conscience’s sake to ‘obey God before men’ only, is here tempered by submission to his father’s wishes. This initial act of sveltiness is in direct opposition to Agnes Beaumont whose desire to follow a specific Independent doctrine at the Church at Gamlinghay leads her into dangerous dispute with her own father<sup>330</sup>. Although she labours over her decision and is certainly aware of the possible consequences of alienating her sole source of income, she still perseveres with her dissent. Clarkson favours instead a more indirect dissent that placates his father and yet still allows him to fulfil his spiritual nonconformity.

His epiphany of dissent is born out of self-awareness – ‘my heart began to enquire after the purest Ministry’ – and Clarkson has the strength of character not only to identify the spiritual lack he sees in his parents’ belief system but also to act upon it; as he says, ‘this was our devotion in those days; but increasing in knowledge, I judged to pray another mans

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<sup>328</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>330</sup> For a discussion of Beaumont’s *Narrative*, see chapter two.

form, was vaine babling, and not acceptable to God.’<sup>331</sup> Clarkson’s cultivation of a svelte response to the constraints of dogmatic belief frees him from one grand narrative and allows him to begin the task of constructing his own. Whereas Beaumont established herself as an effective little narrative in a state of differend with various paternal authorities, Clarkson adopts the doctrinal substance of successive grand narratives until more a favourable opportunity – in the form of membership of another sect – asserts itself.

This svelte progression lends Clarkson’s faith elasticity and there are parallels with Bunyan’s character of Pliable from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Pliable’s diminishing faith in Christian at the ‘Slow of Dispond’ where he abandons the pilgrimage after exclaiming: ‘Is this the happiness you have told me all this while of? if we have such ill speed at our first setting out, What may we expect, ‘twixt this and our Journeys end?’<sup>332</sup> is a rather unfair comparison, but the ease with which Clarkson adopts each new doctrine and the fact he repeats the process seven times over the space of twenty years raises questions as to the legitimacy of his own spiritual convictions. A. L. Morton has written that ‘the assurance with which [Clarkson] embraces each new creed is only equalled by the decision with which he rejects all his previous convictions’<sup>333</sup> and although I would agree that Clarkson makes some bold decisions when he chooses to abandon one sect in favour of another, I think the same qualities of false piety he displayed during his adolescence are seen here. Clarkson does have an ultimate goal but no obvious way of achieving it so his fluid, and comprehensive, movement through the sectarian world looks more like directionless wandering rather than a linear progression.

‘Thirdly I left them (the Presbyterians), and travelled to the Church of the Independents; for this I observed as wars increased, so variety of judgements

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<sup>331</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 5.

<sup>332</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics) 1998, p. 13.

<sup>333</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 115.

increased: and coming to them, of which was Mr. *Goodwin*, and some others, I discerned their Doctrine clearer, and of a more moderate spirit'.<sup>334</sup>

Seeing the ineffectuality of one sect – and even how the practices of that sect affected society to its detriment – Clarkson is moved to leave it for a more 'moderate' church. This is a particularly subjective method of worship. Clarkson sees doctrine as a secular activity that is informed, in varying degrees, by religion.

Displaying the attributes of what Hill called 'A quite different sort of master-less (man)',<sup>335</sup> Clarkson here exemplifies the idea of dissenting nonconformism. The itinerant sectary wandering from church to church has parallels in the wider tradition of Puritan spiritual autobiography but is here underlined by the style of Clarkson's writing. Each episode is prefaced by a numerical reminder – a tally – that records each change of belief as his journey progresses. That the Presbyterian Church was the second to which he allied himself, that he quickly finds its doctrine unfavourable, and the dismissive way in which he relates his leaving it, must have caused some consternation among contemporary readers. It is in fact though this light-heartedness that lends sympathy to Clarkson's narrative. A more earnest tract might have lent the narrative a tone of absurdity and as Morton asserts: 'Clarkson never hesitates to show himself in an unfavourable light and the assurance with which he embraces each new creed is only equalled by the decision with which he rejects all his previous convictions'.<sup>336</sup>

Clarkson is not unique in his apparently contrary attitude toward worship. John Bunyan describes a number of his encounters with various sects and churches in *Grace Abounding* and other Ranters like Abiezer Coppe found themselves unable to commit to one

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<sup>334</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>335</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 41.

<sup>336</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 113.

method of worship. In his *Copp's Return to the Wayes of Truth*, Coppe asserts that 'Neither is there, or was there any (even the highest and strictest) way of Religion, but I have zealously walked in it, as many hundreds can bear me witness'.<sup>337</sup> The contention is the same as Clarkson's theme of 'many a sad and weary Journey through many Religious Countreys' – that the medium of worship, or at least that which was practised by the State church, is a construct suitable only for those whose belief is unshakeable. Since neither Coppe nor Clarkson are able to find this level of spiritual contentment in external doctrine, the internal light of salvation leads them to assert the kind of Ranter thinking that proved so problematic for authority. To be svelte in this instance is to sidestep the constraints of the Church (and in the process those of authority as a whole) in order to fulfil the criteria of election. This is serious subversive thought at every level – social, political, religious. Clarkson, along with his fellow dissenters, had as Hill points out 'chosen the condition of master-lessness by opting out of the state church, so closely modelled on the hierarchical structure of society, so tightly controlled by parson and squire'.<sup>338</sup> It shows a thoroughly sceptical view of the world and a general air of suspicion of the grand narrative upon which society was based. It is also, for Clarkson, essential.

### **Clarkson's Svelte Approach to Dissent**

The flirtation Clarkson enters into with the Presbyterians, although initially appealing after the dissatisfaction he experiences with his Anglican upbringing, is short-lived and he is quick to identify here a similar spiritual lack. Despite this, he is again willing to endure the Presbyterian doctrine until such time as an alternative approach to faith becomes apparent:

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<sup>337</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *Selected Writings*, p. 73.

<sup>338</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 41.

Nay there I found my soul the more oppressed, and further ensnared in the land of *Egypt*, burning Brick all the day; but I knowing no further light, I was willing to bear their yoke, and sometimes found it pleasant; for herein consisted the difference of the Presbyterian and Episcopal, onely in a few superstitious Rites and Ceremonies, as also their Doctrine was more lively than the Episcopal, for they would thunder the Pulpit with an unknown God, which then I thought was true, and sharply reprove sin, though since I saw we were the greatest sinners; but however their Doctrine I liked, it being the highest I then heard of.<sup>339</sup>

Although Clarkson is alluding here to spiritual ignorance from the autobiographical position of hindsight, he is also admitting to being ‘willing to bear [the Presbyterian] yoke’ of what for him was a false doctrine. His ability to concede that the Church through which his spirituality is expressed is incommensurable with that of his internal desire for his ‘Fathers house’ underlines his svelteness. These two discourses, what Lyotard would refer to as phrase regimens, result in the kind of differend that renders Clarkson’s ‘soul the more oppressed’ and yet in spite of this, he endeavours to make the most of the situation and perhaps because of the *sturm und drang* preached by the Presbyterian ministers, eventually embraces the Independent Antinomianism of men like Paul Hobson. John Stachniewski has called Clarkson’s adoption of Presbyterian ministry a ‘state of masochistic dependence’<sup>340</sup> but the ease with which he unreservedly abandons it in favour of Antinomian democracy suggests a more tenuous relationship, one in which competing phrase regimens lead Clarkson into a cycle of religious indeterminacy.

Clarkson readily accepts the Antinomian doctrine of Free Grace – whereby salvation was theoretically universal – and after making a career for himself as an itinerant preacher is invited to minister in the Norfolk parish of Pulham, where he finds individual contentment but the radical quality of his preaching brings him into conflict with more orthodox, Calvinist Independents:

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<sup>339</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 7.

<sup>340</sup> John Stachniewski, ‘Introduction’, *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xxxv.

So there for a time I was settled for twenty shillings a week, and very gallantly was provided for, so thought I was in Heaven upon earth, judging the Priests had a brave time in this world, to have a house built for them, to tell the people stories of other mens work. Now after I had continued half a year, more or less, the Ministers began to envy me for my Doctrine, it being Free Grace, so contrary to theirs, and that the more, their people came from their own Parish to hear me, so that they called me *Sheep-Stealer* for robbing them of their flocks, and to that end came to catch and trap me at several Lectures when I was called, that at last they prevailed with the Heads of the Parish to turn me out.<sup>341</sup>

The unshakeable, dogmatic belief of these Calvinist ministers is in direct opposition to the flexibility displayed by Clarkson when he endured the fierce spiritual grand narrative they delivered from their own pulpits. The ministers' metanarrative gives no quarter and rather than adopting a svelte approach they, in the tradition of empirical authority, refuse a discourse and simply turn Clarkson the 'Sheep-Stealer' out.

Clarkson similarly confounds the authority of the court after his imprisonment for Baptist activity in staunchly Presbyterian Suffolk. The radical nature of Clarkson's 'dipping' leads the Church authorities into such a state of consternation that there 'was no small stir among the priests what to do with me' and he is arrested. His performance, like that of his wife, under questioning is undoubtedly the most effective illustration of the svelte approach Clarkson is able to adopt at will and shows the necessity of this approach when entering into conflict with a grand narrative. Like Agnes Beaumont, who draws upon soteriological confidence in order to subvert patriarchal authority during her trial, Clarkson answers the charges against him with an air of theatricality and is able to adapt to circumstance successfully and with some humour:

So to the Hall I was guarded, the room being full, I was conveyed up to the Chairman, who asked my name? To which I replied, this was strange that you had a Warrant to take me, and know not my name: Well, that was no matter, do you tell us your name: so I told them: What countrey-man are you? I said *Lancashire*. What made you travel so far off into these parts? The like motions that moved others,

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<sup>341</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 11.



moved me. How long have you professed this way of dipping? Not so long as I ought to have done, had my understanding been enlightened. What then, you approve of what you do? Otherways I should not do it. How many have you dipped in these parts? I being a free born subject of this Nation ought not to accuse my self; but you are to prove your charge, by sufficient witness against me: but however I being brought before you for my obedience to the Commands of Christ, I am neither afraid nor ashamed to tell you what I have done.<sup>342</sup>

This discourse raises its own differend and the incommensurability of the respective parties is palpable; the serene, charming Clarkson on the one hand, fielding each attack with dry wit and candour, the red-faced figure of orthodoxy on the other becoming increasingly frustrated by the effectiveness of the dissenter's defence. Clarkson's later sentence of banishment was never carried out and he was released from prison after a month. Christopher Hill has suggested that this 'lenient treatment presumably means that he recanted more easily than Coppe: henceforth we hear no more of Clarkson as "the Captain of the Rant"',<sup>343</sup> and while this might be true, it only proves again the effectiveness of Clarkson's svelte approach.

### **Conclusion: A Soteriological Malady**

This study has so far inferred the positive impact Clarkson's svelte tendencies have on the events recorded in *Lost Sheep Found* but it could be argued that the soteriological malady that Clarkson, like so many other nonconformist sectaries, experiences has its source in the very flexibility that allows him to undermine the political and religious grand narratives with so much success. The drive to attain spiritual 'truth' sees Clarkson continually entering into crises of conviction through a cyclical process of adhering to and then abandoning the doctrines of any given sect. A pattern emerges initially when he passes through the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Independent groups before settling for a while with an Antinomian belief in Free Grace. The steady move towards a more democratic appraisal of salvation is an obvious

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<sup>342</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>343</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 216.

one and it seems that Clarkson is embarked upon a linear pilgrimage after all. A chance meeting with ‘a Teacher of the Baptists’, John Tyler, leads Clarkson away from this path however and the process of indoctrination begins again:

Now I knowing no other but that those sayings, *Go ye teach all Nations, baptizing them, and lo I am with you to the end of the world*; that continuance to the end of the world, was the Load-stone that brought me to believe that the Baptism of the Apostles was as much in force now, as in their days, and that Command did as really belong to me as to them; so being convinced, for *London* I went to be further satisfied, so that after a little discourse with *Patience*, I was by him baptized in the water that runneth about the *Tower*, after which I stayed at *London* about a week.<sup>344</sup>

The tradition of the Puritan spiritual autobiography embraces, as I have discussed in previous chapters, psychological fluctuation between extremes of hope and despair as a means of self-examination as the individual looks for signs of election or reprobation. Clarkson dissents somewhat from this pattern in the way in which he, ostensibly at least, avoids soteriological turmoil and instead experiences successive spiritual fulfilments, however fluid. The passage quoted above shows Clarkson to be something of a push-over in this instance, moving to London until he is ‘further satisfied’ after apparently already being ‘convinced’ by the Baptist doctrine. These repeated conversions are symptomatic of his sveltiness and they prevent him from attaining definitive personal grace in the way Agnes Beaumont, for instance, claims to have evidence of in her *Narrative*.

This predicament raises important questions with regard to the notion of the conversion experience and its place in *Lost Sheep Found*. The controversy about the nature of an established Ranter sect aside, it is worth considering the impact Ranter tendencies, and those of Antinomianism as a whole, would have had on Clarkson’s understanding of grace and how this manifests itself in his spiritual autobiography. Nigel Smith points out that ‘Ranters believed that God dwelt inside them, as an inner light whose authority was above all

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<sup>344</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, pp. 11-12.

laws. Salvation existed here on earth, and any act was justifiable so long as it was performed under the working of the spirit'.<sup>345</sup> This immediately puts the doctrines of sects like Anabaptists and Seekers – both for whom Clarkson devoted time and faith – into a state of differend. For Clarkson to be able to contend with such incommensurable belief systems and to switch between them in a matter of a few months makes his sveltteness begin to look like an increasingly unfulfilling, meandering spiritual journey.

By the time Clarkson falls in with the Seekers his spiritual drifting has become the cause of inertia with regard to faith. The hypocrisy that drove him from the Episcopal doctrine is now something he observes in himself although his willingness to attend to it is not evident and he remains content in his status quo:

I had great knowledge in the things of God, yet I found my heart was not right to what I pretended, but full of lust and vain-glory of this world, finding no truth in sincerity that I had gone through, but meerly the vain pride and conceit of Reasons imagination, finding my heart with the rest, seeking nothing but the praise of men in the heighth of my prayer and preaching, yet in my doctrine through all these opinions, pleading the contrary, yea abasing my self, and exalting a Christ that then I knew not.<sup>346</sup>

This passage implies a dichotomy between Clarkson's internal spiritual ideal and the situational context in which he exists. 'I concluded', he writes, 'there was none could live without sin in this world' which represents a fairly conclusive rebuttal of his recent Ranter thinking and illustrates his rather hopeless position – a lost sheep indeed.

The sustained periods of freely-admitted spiritual hypocrisy certainly contribute to Clarkson's crisis of faith and are unquestionably the result of his pliability with regard to spiritual authority. Just how certain is he of his convictions when he embarks upon any of his ventures into new sects and more importantly, what part does his sveltteness play in his willingness to continue to embrace not only doctrine he did not believe, but preach it? An

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<sup>345</sup> Nigel Smith, *A Collection of Ranter Writings*, p. 7.

<sup>346</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, pp. 20-21.

indication of his lack of direction and hypocritical stance can be found in this rather explicit illustration of his extreme sveltiness:

I return'd to my wife in *Suffolk*, and wholly bent my mind to travel up & down the country, preaching for monies, which then I intended for *London*, so coming to *Colchester* where I had *John Aplewhit*, *Purkis*, and some other friends, I preached in publick; so going for *London*, a mile from *Colchester*, I set my Cane upright upon the ground, and which way it fell, that way I would go.<sup>347</sup>

It is difficult to sympathise with this kind of itinerant morality and it is tempting to re-evaluate Clarkson's earlier account of his search for 'true belief' as being an empty exercise in religious indecision. Svelteness here looks less like adaptability and more like aimlessness and Clarkson's handling of it in his writing reinforces this position: 'so falling towards *Kent*, I was at a stand what I should do there'.<sup>348</sup> The failure of the little narrative represented by Clarkson's dissent from any real belief in the doctrine of the sects he encounters is not in this instance at the expense of a dominant metanarrative. It is the result of Clarkson's willingness to bend to circumstance and to not commit to structured faith.

Prior to what A. L. Morton has called 'his next and final change',<sup>349</sup> Clarkson embarks upon perhaps the most outlandish pursuit recorded in the narrative. He is examined by Parliament after gaining something of a reputation as a Ranter par excellence: 'Now I being as they said, *Captain of the Rant*, I had most of the principle women came to my lodging for knowledge'.<sup>350</sup> Upon his release he appears to have ceased the search for spiritual fulfilment and decided upon a career as a travelling physician, astrologer, and magician:

Now in the interim I attempted the art of Astrology and Physick, which in a short time I gained and therewith travelled up and down Cambridgeshire and *Essex*, as *Linton* and *Saffronwalden*, and other countrey towns, improving my skill to the utmost, that I had clients many yet could not be therewith contended, but aspired to the art of Magick, so finding some of Doctor *Wards* and *Woolards* Manuscripts, I improved my

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<sup>347</sup> *ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>348</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 21.

<sup>349</sup> A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 138.

<sup>350</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 26.

genius to fetch Goods back that were stoln, yea to raise spirits and, and fetch treasure out of the earth.<sup>351</sup>

Although this state was probably symptomatic of the wider mood of disappointment after the failure of the Revolutionary Interregnum and the promises made by charismatic sectaries (Clarkson included), adapting to a shortfall of faith by finding itinerant work as a trickster does not convince. Svelteness here comes to a head and Clarkson's spiritual drift looks to be irreconcilable.

Clarkson devotes the final third of *The Lost Sheep Found* to a polemic on Muggletonianism to which he allied himself, finally, in 1658. The Muggletonian movement began in February 1651 when over the course of three consecutive mornings John Reeve apparently received the word of God and learned that he, along with fellow tailor Lodowick Muggleton, were the last witnesses described in the Book of Revelation. The pair were subsequently tried for blasphemy in 1653 and Clarkson himself entered into dispute with the sect by attempting, unsuccessfully, to oust Muggleton and replace him as one of the two prophets.

J. C. Davis sees Clarkson's position, as Clarkson himself saw it, as 'the onely true converted Messenger of Jesus Christ' within the Third Commission as being central to the aim of *Lost Sheep Found*, marginalising the importance of its autobiographical structure which he finds to be 'subordinate to these themes'. For Davis, Clarkson's seemingly directionless wandering through successive nonconformist sects is evidence rather of what little authority these churches have over dissenting individuals:

Clarkson's life is therefore presented in this work as a type the purpose of which is to give recognisable historical meaning to an argument which rejects two antitheses. The fundamental proposition is that the authority of the old churches is spent, their time is over. But Clarkson no longer wants to accept the sectarian consequence that inner illumination or 'Reason' replaces the authority of institutional faith. The sects

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<sup>351</sup> *ibid*, p. 32.

have also to be inadequate and all of this must lead towards the inevitability and necessity of an authoritative Third Commission.<sup>352</sup>

To take this position further then, Clarkson, in assuming a central role in the Third Commission, is establishing himself as a grand narrative after having first rejected the doctrines of six sects – each of which was a form of spiritual authority. It is perhaps the final illustration of his svelte attitude toward salvation.

Clarkson's writing in this final portion of *Lost Sheep Found* becomes somewhat melodramatic and is reminiscent of Coppe's most energetic Rantering but more importantly it shows the position Clarkson adopts to be a culmination of the svelte approach, one that has concluded faith and Church to be irreconcilable and that spiritual truth can only exist within an individual grand narrative:

As now the last and highest truth is held forth in this our last Commission, as in my writings I have told you again and again, that there is no truth but what is revealed by us, and no way to eternal happines without us, so that when you have established that so called *Religion* I then expect no other dealings at your hands, than our brethren the Apostles found from your fore-Fathers; and then your sons in the next generation, will say of you as now ye say of your fathers; but wo, wo, if not for fear, yet for shame leave off your teaming your selves the Churches of Christ, and that your traditioned notional Forms are the true ways of Christ, that so you may be more excusable in the eternal Account of the Lord.<sup>353</sup>

After enduring 'many Religious Countreys' Clarkson finds truth in none. The svelte answer to this differend is to negate organised worship and adopt the rather egotistical position of representative of God's final commission. His final soteriological state is as flexible as his sectarian wanderings.

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<sup>352</sup> J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 67.

<sup>353</sup> *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 46.

## Chapter Four

‘... dangerously poisoned and forestalled with a heathenish and harsh conceit of God.’  
Physical Manifestations of Religious Dissent in Richard Norwood’s *Confessions*

### Introduction

Having looked at three radical dissenters whose spiritual autobiographies diverge from the assumed classic Calvinist model, I’d like to turn now to a figure whose conversion narrative dissents even further from received expectations as to the style and content of the religious autobiographical text from mid-seventeenth century England. I will situate what I see as Richard Norwood’s geographical dissent within the current critical model of competing phrase regimens and differends and posit that what amount to extreme physical manifestations of soteriological doubt stem from the incommensurability of individual spiritual expectation with predestinarian doctrine. A close reading of Norwood’s *Confessions* (written in 1640) will illustrate how spiritual autobiography could be employed to communicate an ultimately unsuccessful search for evidence of the grand narrative of grace and also the violent physical effects the conversion process had on the dissenting individual.

Richard Norwood stands apart somewhat from the other dissenting figures under consideration here. As a teacher of mathematics, author of books on navigation, apprentice fishmonger, unwilling pirate, and, perhaps most impressive of all, surveyor of the Bermudas, his life had more of the exotic about it than Beaumont’s, Clarkson’s, even Bunyan’s. Far from being a major public figure – Norwood is described in one of the few studies of his

spiritual autobiography as being, ‘fairly well known’<sup>354</sup> – he was nevertheless a gregarious individual, coming into contact with all manner of influential, often colourful, people and was far more of a well-travelled individual than someone like Agnes Beaumont who, due to circumstances relating to economics and gender, is never in a position to move more than a dozen miles from the place of her birth until late in life; and so as a result Norwood is able to situate his spiritual crises in a much wider context.

Norwood wrote a spiritual autobiography that, while adhering to a recognisably Puritan model of the conversion narrative, diverges from many of the idiosyncrasies that came to define the genre. His *Confessions* is a far more generous text in terms of biographical material than *Grace Abounding* and is certainly less single-minded with regard to its thematic purpose. Perhaps because Norwood had experienced far more of the world beyond the nonconformist sects than most other Puritan writers, his autobiography is much more aware of its surroundings and contextualises its subjective study in a recognisable social environment. As Owen C. Watkins suggests, Norwood’s *Confessions*, ‘give us as rounded a portrait as we get anywhere in Puritan autobiography outside of Baxter’s *Reliquiae*’<sup>355</sup> and, more importantly with regard to the present study, Norwood’s writing does not presuppose a satisfactory spiritual conclusion in the manner of classic spiritual autobiography:

[Norwood’s] honesty saves him from tying everything up too neatly. Even after twenty years of reflection he is still not certain whether he has derived benefit or harm from his period of depression: gains and losses are too evenly balanced, and it remains an open question.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) 1972, p. 70.

<sup>355</sup> *ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>356</sup> *ibid*, p. 80.



The object of this chapter is to read Norwood's *Confessions* in relation to his rather colourful experiential background in order to judge the impact this had upon his soteriological growth and how it affected his spiritual autobiography.

Norwood's text is a vital inclusion for any study of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography, despite centuries of marginal status, because of the author's inherent difference. Norwood represents a vaguely aristocratic class within the dissenting oeuvre which is startling given the claims of impoverishment made by John Bunyan in *Grace Abounding*, Agnes Beaumont's precarious financial position, and the general sense that the nonconformist sects grew out of a discontented proletariat. Christopher Hill reinforces this sense when describing the protestant sectaries:

These had as it were chosen the condition of masterlessness by opting out of the state church, so tightly controlled by parson and squire. Sects were strongest in the towns, where they created hospitable communities for men, often immigrants, who aspired to keep themselves above the level of casual labour and pauperism: small craftsmen, apprentices, serious-minded labourious men, all could recognise each other as the elect in a godless world.<sup>357</sup>

No mention here of the depressive, impoverished gentry.

Norwood's status as a spiritual outsider almost certainly had antecedents in his self-involved personality and his father's financial misfortune (or most likely, mismanagement). As well as this, Norwood, of course, was not a member of any recognised congregation – or at least, he never refers to one in his narrative – and so his spirituality, indeed his moment of soteriological conviction, is fuelled by a subjective intellectual process. As Owen C. Watkins points out, 'Norwood's responses are individual ones, not restricted by conventional Puritan categories and areas of concern',<sup>358</sup> and throughout *Confessions* Norwood displays a fierce individuality that is at once beneficial and at the same time leads him into depression and

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<sup>357</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 41.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

self-destructive behaviour. That his privileged social status, and the trappings and expectations such status implied, is taken from him during early adolescence makes his fall into vice and immorality all the more dramatic and is almost certainly the cause of his acute, almost paranoiac, self-awareness.

Norwood, even more so than Laurence Clarkson, displays a multitude of contradictory positions during the course of his narrative and it is this emotional turmoil, this crisis of legitimation, which forms the basis of his particular nonconformist dissent. Jean-Francois Lyotard expresses a similar predicament in his *The Postmodern Condition*:

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyagers, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotive, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.<sup>359</sup>

If we define the metanarrative here to be the hegemonic Church and ‘progress in the sciences’ to denote also the emergence of the notion of individual self, then we have a neat encapsulation of Norwood’s spiritual turmoil. Although it is true that John Bunyan flirted with extreme nonconformism (his short involvement with Ranterism, for example) as part of his conflict with the metanarrative of salvation, the authority to which even the most left-field of dissenters displays credence, there is less explicit reference to the kind of neo-bipolarism evidenced in the actions of Richard Norwood<sup>360</sup>. Again, we must look to Norwood’s enormous range of environmental experiences, his movement between extremes of privilege

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<sup>359</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.

<sup>360</sup> For a recent study of Bunyan’s psychology, see Vera J. Camden, ‘Young Man Bunyan’.

and poverty, between Puritanism and popery, as well as his superficially successful professional endeavours:

(Norwood) ran away to sea, served as a soldier in the Netherlands, and walked to Rome as a pilgrim. Later he made two voyages to the Mediterranean, taught himself enough navigation to instruct his skipper, and had a temporary association with Sir Henry Mainwaring shortly before Sir Henry turned to piracy. He invented and demonstrated a diving bell, and went to Bermuda with some of the early settlers as a technical expert. All this before he was twenty-four.<sup>361</sup>

This chapter will then provide a close reading of the *Confessions* and examine how Norwood employed the structural conventions of a classic conversion narrative to give an account of a life seemingly at odds with its changing external environment and a subjective self experiencing a very real crisis of legitimation.

### **Norwood's *Confessions***

That Richard Norwood's *Confessions* shares some structural conventions with the kind of biographical material found in contemporary funeral sermons – where the lives of the pious were summarised in the pulpit – is unsurprising since spiritual autobiography grew out of that tradition to some degree. As Roger Sharrock notes, 'The funeral sermon was often a biography, concentrating on providences, conversion, and fruitful ministry'<sup>362</sup>, and Norwood's narrative is very much a retrogressive history of his life up to 1639 or 1640. In this respect it resembles Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* more than it does Beaumont's *Narrative* or Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found*; texts that, rather than providing a sequential record of the individual's journey to assumed salvation, focus on particular events that draw attention to

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<sup>361</sup> Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, p. 70.

<sup>362</sup> Roger Sharrock, 'Introduction', *Grace Abounding*, p. xxix.

aspects of their soteriological status. *Confessions*, ostensibly at least, perpetuates the model of classic spiritual autobiography.

Norwood's account of his early sinful life – an account that follows closely the Calvinist path to salvation as dictated by William Perkins's highly structured 'Mappe' – is depicted as a necessary step in spiritual advancement but something the mature and apparently elect Norwood can hardly bear to relive, as he reflects, 'I even abhor the remembrance of those times'.<sup>363</sup> Unlike the 'meanest sort' of education visited upon John Bunyan, Norwood receives the kind of schooling that befitted the son of a gentleman and he describes this with some precision as if to underline the providences he was to later ignore: 'I went through the Latin Grammer and other books appertayning, and entered into the Greek'.<sup>364</sup> It is worth pointing out here as well the importance placed upon education and in particular, literacy by Puritan doctrine, a tendency adopted by later religious nonconformists that explains the literacy of people like Bunyan and the otherwise rather isolated Agnes Beaumont. As Keeble points out,

Literacy rates were higher amongst nonconformists than in other sectors of society. Not only did they write copiously, confident of nonconformist readers, but they were heirs to the educational drive of Puritanism and... continued to be enthusiastic advocates of the benefits of literacy, encouraging all classes of society, and especially children, to learn to read and to write and to be diligent practitioners of these skills.<sup>365</sup>

Having said that, Norwood does seem to have had something of a gift with regard to education and this, coupled with sufficient financial backing, would explain the high level of his schooling. Despite this rather privileged beginning however, Norwood becomes

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<sup>363</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, in John Stachniewski with Anita Pacheco (eds.), *Grace Abounding with other Spiritual Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1998, p. 126. All further quotations are from this edition unless otherwise stated. The only full edition is the modern-spelling, *The Journal of Richard Norwood, Surveyor of Bermuda*, ed. W. F. Craven and W. B. Hayward (New York) 1945, but I have been unable to locate a copy of this edition. Stachniewski's text is taken from the manuscript which is held in the Bermuda Archives.

<sup>364</sup> *Confessions*, p. 125.

<sup>365</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, pp. 136-137.

progressively enamoured of sinful excesses, something to which he alludes as being a characteristic of his natural state from the outset when he depicts the relationship he had with his parents,

In whom there was a severe Disposition and cariage towards me suitable to that mass of sin and folly which was bound up in my heart.<sup>366</sup>

Writing with hindsight and from a position of election – or so he would have the reader believe – Norwood here stresses the failings of his reprobate self and is at pains to point out the various interventions from external sources that impacted upon his unregenerate life. Again, he is grounding his text in the tradition of Puritan autobiography, situating himself in the standard pattern of confessional writing. By emphasising the piety and upright nature of his teachers and family, Norwood creates an even more negative self-image than he would have, given an upbringing like that of other dissenting puritans. His intention at the beginning of his narrative is to show how far he was to fall:

... the Lord was pleased, by means of my parents, School-dame, School-masters and sermons to plant in my heart some seeds of religion and the fear of God, which though no fruits of regeneration yet through the blessing of God they were special preservatives to keep me for many years after from diverse enormous sins whereof I was in danger, and wherein in likelihood I should have perished.

But for the excessive vanity and wickednes of my heart and mind even then, and the fruits thereof which began to put forth apace, it was just I should be deprived of those blessings and favours, and left more to the vanity of myne own heart as I was.<sup>367</sup>

Norwood rounds off his appraisal of his early childhood with accounts of his delivery from various dangers, divine interventions that hint at the possibility of his future conversion. An episode in which he survives a near-drowning – ‘but by God’s providence I was drawn out’ – brings to mind Bunyan’s catalogue of merciful escapes in *Grace Abounding*:

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<sup>366</sup> *Confessions*, p. 125.

<sup>367</sup> *Confessions*, p. 125.

For once I fell into a crick of the sea, and hardly escaped drowning: another time I fell out of a Boat into *Bedford-River*, but mercy yet preserved me alive: Besides, another time being in the field, with one of my companions, it chanced that an Adder passed over the High way, so I having a stick in mine hand, struck her over the back; and having stounded her, I forced open her mouth with my stick, and plucked her sting out with my fingers, by which act had not God been merciful to me, I might by my desperateness have brought myself to mine end.<sup>368</sup>

The point is that, like Bunyan, Norwood is on the one hand reckless in his behaviour and yet fearful of the spiritual outcome should he die in reprobation. God is seen to intervene frequently on Norwood's behalf despite a total lack of religious commitment or indeed any sense of lingering belief. The same can be said of Norwood's other vices. At school he is prone to bouts of pride and vanity – essentially, showing off – and invariably suffers as a result. After attempting to impress a female visitor to his school with an exhibition of his athletic prowess for example, the young boy trips and hurts himself; the subsequent humiliation, 'I could nor rise again till my Dame came and took me up. And paid me well for it', leads the older, elect narrator to observe that this again was evidence of God's didactic influence on a prospective member of the elect: 'And so it pleased the Lord to meet with that sin of pride and self conceitedness usually from my childhood with sharp and greivous stripes.'<sup>369</sup> These physical reminders appear to have comforted Norwood initially during his time at school although the cumulative effect this continual divine influence had was to become more of a negative force as he matured and began the process of spiritual self examination.

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<sup>368</sup> *Grace Abounding*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>369</sup> *Confessions*, p. 127.

## Claims of Evidence of Grace and Signs of Reprobation

The most telling evidence at this early stage of Norwood's spiritual development that he is destined for salvation is his miraculous recovery from the plague, not once but twice. Connotations surrounding the association of plague with sin would seem to place great importance on to this episode. As Christopher Hill writes, 'The preacher's association of plague with 'sin' led them and magistrates to attack the sins of the poor – idle vagrants, ale-houses, drunkards, plays, as well as popular sports'.<sup>370</sup> This list would seem to mirror the activities enjoyed by Norwood in the years immediately after he left school and yet, even when stricken with plague – presumably the epidemic of 1625 that claimed the lives of over thirty-five thousand Londoners – 'the Lord in his mercy spared me then also restored me to health'. Although Norwood refrains from equating contracting plague as a result of any moral wrongdoing on his part, the inference is obvious, that he is saved from it when so many others succumbed betrays a staunchly predestinarian doctrine.

Norwood's time at school would appear to have been productive and he stresses his success in lessons as strongly as Bunyan insists upon his lack of education. This scholarly application does not seem to have gained favour with other boys:

I had aptness and readiness in versifying above the rest of my school-fellows for which they called me Ovid and sometimes in scorn or derision Naso, the first I was proud of, the other I could not endure.<sup>371</sup>

We are unable to gauge Norwood's facial characteristics and so must assume the nickname had other connotations in keeping with his personality about which he writes with a frankness and honesty. The only childhood association mentioned by name – one Adolphus Speed – arouses in Norwood feelings of jealousy due to an assumption that, 'God had endued him

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<sup>370</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, p. 352.

<sup>371</sup> *Confessions*, p. 129.

with sundry gifts and virtues which I had not, and that he was much in the favour of God, but that I was not, or not so much', and there are other indications of Norwood's intrinsic failings of character. These failings in particular affect his psychological state which he describes as being:

... possess with much inward pride and vanity of mind, and yet on the contrary (as a Just punishment for the former) as often subject to a very dejected and despairing mind without any very notable cause for either.<sup>372</sup>

Norwood feels he is being (justly) punished for his reprobate qualities, not only in terms of spirituality – that comes later – but rather in very secular ways. These secular hardships to some extent parallel Agnes Beaumont's experiences in the aftermath of the death of her father although it must be said that Beaumont's narrative is written from a stated position of election and her 'persecutions' are seen as evidence of soteriological assurance rather than as being some form of divine chastisement. If Beaumont's account of her suffering mirrored that of the martyrs of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, Norwood's has perhaps more in common with the anti-hero Satan of *Paradise Lost*. Parallels can be certainly drawn between the sense of spiritual and material losses Norwood was to experience during adolescence and into adulthood and the Satan of *Book One* of Milton's epic:

Him the Almighty Power  
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky  
With hideous ruin and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In adamantine chains and penal fire,  
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms.  
Nine times the space that measures day and night  
To mortal men, he with his horrid crew  
Lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf  
Confounded though immortal. But his doom  
Reserved him to more wrath; for now he thought

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<sup>372</sup> *ibid*, p. 129.



Both of lost happiness and lasting pain  
Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes,  
That witnessed huge affliction and dismay  
Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate.<sup>373</sup>

It could be said that this image reflects the nonconformist predestinarian malady as a whole and it certainly approaches the turbulent emotional state of the John Bunyan of *Grace Abounding*, but it also encapsulates the frustration that leads Norwood into his own individual soteriological crises. N. H. Keeble reminds us that Satan's 'conviction that it is "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven" later becomes Eve's: "inferior who is free?"<sup>374</sup>, and it is this sentiment that best describes Norwood's state of mind during the sustained periods of doubt and the shadow of reprobation he perceives himself to be under.

Before graduating, Norwood's father runs into severe financial difficulty – 'whether through his unskilfulness in that or otherwise I know not but he had very great losses in sheep or otherwise' – and he is unable to continue funding his son's education. The reason for this hardship is not made explicit but Norwood's account suggests it stems from his father's misjudgement and mishandling of his wealth, traits father and son share. The 'great losses which he sustayned' have an immediate impact upon Norwood although again, the hardships visited upon him are due more to his own self-destructive tendencies than to external events. Norwood is offered a continuing place at the school – presumably on the strength of his academic achievements – but instead of accepting the grant and applying himself he 'lost [his] time in sinful and dissolute courses', and the maintenance offered him goes instead to the presumably more deserving, and former source of Norwood's jealousy, Adolphus Steed.

This series of physical setbacks have a massive impact upon Norwood's psychological state. His emerging depressive personality combined with the emotional

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<sup>373</sup> John Milton, 'Paradise Lost: Book One', in Douglas Bush (ed.) *Milton: Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1969, p. 213.

<sup>374</sup> N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 229.

turmoil of a long and painful conversion process lead him into an unsettled existence in which he fluctuates between bouts of mania and sustained periods of inactivity. This state is in some ways comparable to Laurence Clarkson's itinerant existence as a journeyman preacher and his inability to find spiritual contentment in any given congregation. Whereas Clarkson though, as I have shown, is able to adapt to circumstance – to be, essentially, what Lyotard defines as, Svelte – Norwood, again perhaps because of his depression-induced self-defeatism, devolves into a continual state of differend in which he seems to replace every obstacle, both physical and emotional, with another. The result is something like soteriological inertia and Norwood appears to reconcile himself to a state of reprobation for sustained periods of time, often leading to the exasperation of others:

[S]ojourning then with Mr. Blanke it hapned that I burnt my finger, and complayning somewhat of the payne he replyed in jest: What doth a little burning of the finger trouble you so much? How dost thou think to endure the burning of Hell; But I having often thought of that before, answered in good earnest: I know not how I shall endure it. I conceive it to be very intolerable, but there wilbe many there besides me, and I must endure it as others do. He observing that I answered in good earnest grew into a great passion, and said with indignation, I would scorn to have such a base and abject mind as once to entertain such a thought. I answered, I thought there were very few that should be saved, even those that live within the Church. He answered if there were but one man in all the world to be saved he would certainly believe that he was that man, etc.<sup>375</sup>

### **Norwood's Record of Dissent**

It is perhaps symptomatic of the doubt and more importantly, the lack of conviction in the nonconformist personality that leads dissenting individuals like Clarkson and Norwood to such acute non-fulfillment. In a study of John Bunyan's adolescence, Vera J. Camden raises

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<sup>375</sup> *Confessions*, p. 144.

several issues regarding the influence of childhood crises upon his later spiritual and psychological state:

Bunyan's account – sparse though it is – of his early adulthood, in the context of his conversion crisis, offers a record of the evolution of his personality shaped through both personal and historical crisis... his neurotic predicament threatened to consume his considerable energies and even threatened his life.<sup>376</sup>

Figures like Bunyan, Clarkson, and Norwood were obviously more susceptible to depression than the population in general. The crises visited upon them are hardly out of the ordinary and, given the political and social upheaval of the decades in which they wrote, their personal traumas look rather mundane. That said, Norwood's depression is very real and his removal from school initiates the first of many melodramatic statements that betray his self-defeating personality:

... for from that time forwards I went no more to school to any purpose, not meeting with an able schoolmaster, and my father much decaying in his estate, but passed my time in a more fruitless and dissolute manner.<sup>377</sup>

Norwood continues his narrative by relating details of the three years he lives in London apprenticed to a fishmonger. During this time he embraces a stereotypical sinful persona in the manner of the classic conversion process seen in William Perkins' *Mappe*. Norwood takes to his debauched lifestyle with something approaching relish and furnishes his narrative with the kind of statements familiar to readers of *Grace Abounding*; he claims, for instance, that, 'scarce any book seemed more contemptible to me then the Word of God'. Norwood is naturally adopting a literary device here – emphasising his sins in order to maximise the impact of the later conversion – but he also gives some indication of the 'morally corrupting

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<sup>376</sup> Vera J. Camden, 'Young Man Bunyan', p. 48.

<sup>377</sup> *Confessions*, p. 126.

practices' he engages in whilst in London, his writing style capturing the sense of mania he was apparently experiencing:

... being drawn in by other yong men of the town, I acted a woman's part in a stage play; I was so much affected with that practice, that had not the Lord prevented it, I should have chosen it above any other course of life.<sup>378</sup>

While putting Bunyan's bell-ringing to shame, Norwood's implication here is that he was upon a precipice and could at any moment allow reprobation to overwhelm him.

Up to this point in his narrative Norwood, although his background and inherent personality differ markedly from those of the other dissenters examined in this study, stays relatively true to the conventions of spiritual autobiography. From this point on, however, the reader becomes aware of the divergences from this pattern, and Norwood as an individual emerges. It is worth noting that *Confessions* was written in Bermuda in 1639 and 1640. As Watkins quite rightly points out it was 'clearly not part of the main literary tradition of Puritan autobiography' and yet it 'made its own use of a common religious tradition'.<sup>379</sup> Given that Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, perhaps the most widely imitated Puritan conversion narrative, would not appear for another twenty five years, Norwood would instead have been influenced by precursors like the theologian William Perkins and most importantly, by Augustine:

Although he nowhere refers to it, Norwood's account as a whole is an exemplification of Augustine's famous assertion at the beginning of his own confessions, 'For thou hast created us for thyself, and our heart cannot be quieted till it may find repose in thee'. The distinctive feature of his life was that it was shaped by a private quest for what he called a *summum bonum*: a search for secret happiness which constantly eluded him because he misread the clues and looked for it in the wrong places.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>379</sup> Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, p. 71.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

Norwood's unpopularity with his school-fellows, with later acquaintances, as well as his independence from an established religious sect (which might have provided the pastoral support and guidance that was so cherished by Beaumont during her 'persecutions') meant that his search for spiritual contentment was undertaken in almost absolute isolation – his was a truly subjective quest. Many of the decisions he makes, all of which are made without any apparent input from anybody else, look at best impetuous, at worst utterly misguided. His travels through Europe, for instance, exacerbate the spiritual doubt he experienced since leaving school and lead him into a series of desperately comical predicaments.

On his way back to England after travelling through Belgium and Holland – where he fights for the Dutch United Provinces against the Spanish until the declaration of peace in early 1609 – Norwood is rather suddenly taken with the idea of walking to Rome. Apart from the obvious difficulties such an endeavour would entail, travel to Rome necessitated letters of introduction from the English Jesuits at Louvain and Norwood secures these by pretending to be a Catholic, leaving him, understandably, 'much perplexed in mind with objections on both sides'. His journey leaves him isolated from both his family and his God and signs of his spiralling dejection manifest themselves in the tone of his prose:

Now Satan was leading away in triumph his poor vanquished vassal, never likely to have bene recovered again out of his hands, had not the Lord, who hath the hearts of all men in his hands, by his almighty power and gracious providence brought me back again'.<sup>381</sup>

Feigning popery disagrees with Norwood and soon after entering Italy he is afflicted with nightmares the content of which are vivid and most affecting, 'oft-times I verily thought that I descended into Hell and there felt the pains of the damned, with many hideous things'.

Unsettled as ever, and far from the *summum bonum* he strove for, Norwood slips into extreme

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<sup>381</sup> *Confessions*, p. 131.

self-doubt and the implication in his writing suggests a deepening sense of desperation with regard to his soteriological state:

I had some thoughts and purposes to return to England and to settle my self I cared not in how mean a calling so I might have the favour of God and yurn away his displeasure, which I conceived lay heavily upon me but these purposes were not constant but soon vanished again.<sup>382</sup>

The inconstancy of his faith is analogous to his physical discontent and serves to confirm the lack of legitimation Norwood is experiencing. A similar situation arises at the beginning of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* when the ostensibly autobiographical figure of Christian flees his home town in an effort to escape damnation; his flight is hasty, unplanned, and shows complete disregard for his family:

So I saw in my Dream, that the man began to run; Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return: but the Man put his fingers in his Ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life: so he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain.<sup>383</sup>

This reactive response to crises is at odds with Laurence Clarkson's progressive, rather philosophical handling of conflict. It is perhaps the most illustrative example of the impact the spiritual Differend has upon religious dissenters – and is worth exploring at some length.

## **Reactivity and the Spiritual Differend**

Christian's flight from the city of Damnation comes after an exchange with the character, Evangelist, whose intervention during Christian's moment of spiritual doubt includes written instruction with the chilling imperative to 'Fly from the wrath to come'. After handing

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

<sup>383</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Oxford, World's Classics) 1998, pp. 9-10.

Christian the roll of parchment, there is a brief conversation in which a tone of desperation, and the desire to escape damnation are equally prevalent:

The man therefore Read it, and looking upon *Evangelist* very carefully; said, Whither must I fly? Then said *Evangelist*, pointing with his finger over a very wide Field, Do you see yonder *Wicket-gate*? The Man said, No. Then said the other, Do you see yonder shining light? He said, I think I do. Then said *Evangelist*, keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the Gate; at which when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.<sup>384</sup>

The figure of Christian/ Bunyan is initially, and very briefly, wary of the advice he is receiving. He looks at Evangelist ‘very carefully’ as if gauging the man’s intent but immediately after failing to perceive the Wicket-gate that represents spiritual conversion, his demeanour changes and he declares, rather unconvincingly, that he *can* see the shining light. This placates his own doubts as much as it does Evangelist and seemingly within minutes of this conversation, Christian has left his family – presumably to the devastation to come – and set out upon his pilgrimage. This single-mindedness is alluded to by Thomas H. Luxon when he writes that:

Conversion, for Bunyan, entails a turning away from the things of the world and the things of the flesh, and he certainly considered women, wives and children, among those things of the world and flesh.<sup>385</sup>

By ‘turning away’ from temptation – however much that temptation looks like a typical, rural domestic situation – Bunyan takes the first step on his pilgrimage to conversion during which he is eventually relieved of his spiritual burden. By the same token, the Dantesque nightmares visited upon Norwood during his ill-conceived sojourn in Rome subside as he removes himself physically from the seat of Roman Catholicism. There can be no doubting

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<sup>384</sup> *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, p. 9.

<sup>385</sup> Thomas H. Luxon, ‘One Soul Versus One Flesh’, in Vera J. Camden (ed.), *Trauma and Transformation: the Political Progress of John Bunyan*, p. 86.

his appraisal of this phenomenon, ‘When I departed out of Italy to go for England, this disease began to abate and afterwards more when I came into England’,<sup>386</sup> and although his desire to be free of such discomfort is understandable, the ease by which his mind is swayed by circumstance and the speed with which he embraces a new path is not. The need to visit Rome is hardly an idle undertaking especially since his mode of transport, like Christian’s, was pedestrian and the route similarly unplanned.

Norwood’s decision to visit Rome is apparently the result of his discontent with his situation in England; having already spent a considerable time away from his family and faith – albeit in Holland fighting the Spanish, in keeping with his Protestantism – Norwood’s reluctance to return home gives some indication of his state of mind and of the independent nature of his subjective self. The idea of travelling on foot across Europe to Rome seems to overtake Norwood as he is boarding the ship that would have sailed to England, reinforcing the impression that he is more than pliable when it comes to matters of faith and secular endeavours:

Now again I was alone, and travailing towards England, and approaching somewhere near the place where I was to take shipping. When I began again to enter into a serious consideration with my self (as I had sometimes done before) what I should do when I came into England. To further me in my desired course to sea, I thought my friends would be as opposite as formerly they had bene. To be bound apprentice again to any land trade was an abhorring to me to think upon... I began to think that seeing I could not have opportunity as I desired to travail by sea, it would not be amiss to spend some time in travail by land, and go to see Rome.<sup>387</sup>

It seems astonishing that Norwood would choose Rome as a destination simply as an alternative to working in England. It is worth noting that the events recorded here by Norwood occur during the personal rule of Charles I and England was about to embark upon

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<sup>386</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, in John Stachniewski, ed., *Grace Abounding with other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. 133.

<sup>387</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 130.



a sustained period of civil dissent the seeds of which had already been sown. Norwood is vague as to any spiritual motivation – either Catholic or Protestant – behind his turning away from England but he does emphasise from, it must be said, the position of post-conversion hindsight, the emotional turmoil his decision created:

But then I considered I must have the Popes Nuntios Letters (as I had bene informed) and for the obtayning of that I must have a letter from one of the English priests or Jesuits in Lovayne, which they graunted not till after confession, and receiving their sacrament, and so dissembling at least to be a papist. This dissembling I conceived to be very offensive to God.<sup>388</sup>

Despite the misgivings and the ‘offence’ he is obviously aware of, Norwood carries out his plan and indeed arrives in Rome. The journey goes well enough and Norwood falls in with another pilgrim who convinces him that Catholicism is the true religion he has been looking for:

He persuaded me further of the Popish religion than ever I was persuaded before... I conceive it was because I was often checked inwardly for dissembling myself to be of that religion which I denied in my heart; to avoid which check of conscience I was willing for that time of my travel to have been persuaded of the truth of that religion, supposing ignorance to be a far lesser sin that such dissembling; and his reasonings being suitable, prevailed much.<sup>389</sup>

As Watkins points out, ‘Like so many other Puritans, Norwood found that ignorance was not so simple a problem as it appeared to be’<sup>390</sup>, and his dramatic decision begins to look increasingly fallible. His continual use of the word ‘dissembling’ to describe his motivation betrays two matters of interest. The first is that Norwood is writing from the perspective of mature Puritanism and from spiritual contentment – although this in itself is up for debate as I shall show later in this chapter – and he is able to work these indiscretions into the evolving

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>389</sup> Norwood is here quoted in Owen C. Watkins’s *The Puritan Experience*, p. 74.

<sup>390</sup> Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, p. 74.

history of his conversion, using them as a literary tool providing experiential evidence for his election. The catalogue of sins here represents the spiritual danger he overcame on the path to salvation. The second matter concerns the extreme doubt and self-delusion Norwood engages in his attempts to satisfy his need for religious confirmation. The lack of conviction displayed by Norwood in this part of his narrative is perhaps equal to that of other Puritan writers, what remains extraordinary are the lengths he goes to in order to reconcile himself.

Christian's (and by that I mean Bunyan's) intentions of reneging on his past indiscretions and pursuing a pious pilgrimage in the hope of attaining salvation mirror the erratic behaviour of Norwood during his travels to Rome. It is symptomatic of the dissenting condition that Norwood feels he must transfer himself physically to an alien environment in order to improve his spiritual wellbeing. Rome, in this instance, is for Norwood a Wicket-gate, similarly unattainable without a radical religious overhaul. The physical impact of Norwood's geographical transference – symptoms that intensify the further away he travels from England – creates further internal doubt and the familiar cyclical pattern, as evidenced in the vast majority of Puritan conversion narratives, of hope and despair emerges. This geographical transference becomes for Norwood something of a self-perpetuating spiritual burden in that his religious discontent is suddenly manifested in the very act that he hoped would have confirmed his salvation. It is a strikingly postmodern condition and leads Norwood into some even more extraordinary situations.

I have already discussed the occurrence of nightmares in relation to Norwood's proximity to Rome, but there are other unconscious and yet tangible symptoms that exacerbate his depression and also make physical what might otherwise have remained an internalised psychological condition. Norwood's vivid night terrors often left him with what he describes as 'nocturnal polutions' and so extreme are these symptoms that Norwood, perhaps rather melodramatically states that, 'This disease brought me very weak, and surely without the special power of God sustaining me I see not how life should have bene continued.'<sup>391</sup> Again a natural state is converted into a symptom of reprobation and added to a growing list of self-defeating sinful practice. Indeed, in a thoroughly unconvincing appraisal of the occurrences, Norwood is later able to find tenuous soteriological evidence from the same experiential material illustrating the lack of authority in his own beliefs:

About 26 years of age when it pleased the Lord of his free grace and mercy to deliver me from the bonds of my corruptions into the glorious liberty of his saints and children, I was altogether freed from those nocturnal pollutions, yet have bene troubled with that disease unto this day, but seldom and remissly, I give God thanks, as 3 or four times in a year. It was a just judgement of God for my wilful blindness and apostacy contrary to myne own conscience, and contrary to that light and those principles which by education were planted in me.<sup>392</sup>

Perhaps '3 or four times in a year' also relates to the periodic lapses in belief of election like those we see at the conclusion of the conversion narratives written by Bunyan and Beaumont.

The spiritual tussle between prospective saint and Satan is an intrinsic feature of most Puritan conversion narratives. The temptation to degenerate into reprobation – or in many cases the lack of an individual's ability to remove him or herself from an existing state of

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<sup>391</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 133.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

damnation – is often given allegorical form in the shape of psychological conflict with the devil. The Baptist Sarah Davy, writing in her spiritual autobiography, *Heaven Realized*, published in 1670, describes such a conflict in rather chilling prose:

Thus did [Satan] follow me a long time, robbing me of the comfort of many a sweet sermon, making me walk in such sadness, which was taken notice of by my friends.<sup>393</sup>

Similarly, John Bunyan makes it quite clear in *Grace Abounding* just how important a part internal conflict with Satan was to spiritual development. Bunyan illustrates this in an unintentionally humorous encounter with an elderly man:

About this time I took an opportunity to break my Mind to an Antient Christian; and told him all my case. I told him also that I was afraid that I had sinned the sin against the Holy Ghost; and he told me, *He thought so too*. Here therefore I had but cold comfort, but, talking a little more with him, I found him, though a good man, a stranger to much Combate with the Devil. Wherefore I went to God again as well as I could, for Mercie still.<sup>394</sup>

In most instances the devil appears as a vision, in nightmares, or more often than not as a nagging voice whispering in the ear of the afflicted individual. Richard Norwood's experience of this phenomenon is extraordinary in its apparent manifestation not only as dreams, hallucinations, visions, and the like, but as actual physical demonic possession.

There are contemporary allusions to bodies being taken over by Satan. Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, in their *A Short Relation of Cruel Sufferings*, for example, quote a member of the Inquisition (they were interrogated in Malta after preaching and distributing Quaker writings) as saying to them, "Is the Devil so great in you that you cannot speak?"<sup>395</sup>. Yet Norwood's description is particularly vivid, and involves external witnesses, giving the

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<sup>393</sup> Sarah Davy, *Heaven Realized*, in Elspeth Graham et al (ed), *Her Own Life*, p. 171.

<sup>394</sup> *Grace Abounding*, p. 55.

<sup>395</sup> Elspeth Graham, et al., *Her Own Life*, p. 121.

overall sense that Norwood at least believes he is being manipulated by a malignant spirit and his account of it is utterly compelling.

Norwood's experience of possession appears to have become acute during his return to England after his sustained travels in the Bermudas when he suffers from 'fits with despair', a condition that worsens as he reaches his home country. He goes on to describe his sense that Satan is encroaching upon his physical being in terms that approach the gothic horror of James Hogg's Calvinist-tinged *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*:

Besides there was joynd with it (though no visible appearence) yet a very sensible annoyance of satan; sometimes waking sometimes sleeping which in short time also grew to be almost continual. It is hard to express the manner of it but sometimes he seemed to lean on my back or arm or shoulder, sometimes hanging on my cloak or gown. Sometimes it seemed in my feeling as if he had stricken me in sundry places, sometimes as it were handling my heart and working withal a wonderful hardnes therein accompanied with many strange passions affections lusts and blashemies.<sup>396</sup>

Already Norwood is alluding to a malignance that is tangible and although not actually visible he suggests there is physicality to it. Hogg describes a similar air of foreboding in his novel and it is worth quoting a passage in order to illustrate the point that the literary heritage of predestinarian writing continued in a vein similar to that adopted by Norwood:

George became utterly confounded; not only at the import of this persecution, but how in the world it came to pass that this unaccountable being knew all his motions, and every intention of his heart, as it were intuitively. On consulting his own previous feelings and resolutions, he found that the circumstances of his going to such and such a place were often the most casual incidents in nature – the caprice of a moment had carried him there, and yet he had never sat or stood many minutes till there was the self-same being, always in the same position with regard to himself, as

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<sup>396</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, pp. 147-148. It is worth pointing out also John Stachniewski's observation that this passage bears a startling resemblance to the following one from Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, 'sometimes I have thought I should see the Devil, nay, thought I have felt him being me pull my cloathes: he would be also continually at me in the time of prayer, to have done, break off, make haste, you have prayed enough, and stay no longer: still drawing my mind away.' *Grace Abounding*, p. 34.

regularly as the shadow is cast from the substance, or the ray of light from the opposing denser medium.<sup>397</sup>

Norwood's belief that Satan's influence is impinging on his public life in this way is unsurprising given the hold Puritan doctrine had over him and the assumptions of society as a whole with regard to the supernatural. As Christopher Hill notes, 'Most men and women in seventeenth-century Britain still lived in a world of magic, in which God and the devil intervened daily, a world of witches, fairies and charms'<sup>398</sup>, and although Norwood had, by the time he experienced his 'possession' and certainly by 1640 when he wrote *Confessions*, experienced more of the world than most of his peers, the idea of a physical manifestation of Satan is certainly something he is prepared to accept.

Intense self-examination like that performed by all writers of Puritan spiritual autobiographies, inevitably leads, as I have shown in previous chapters, to hallucinatory experiences or visions that symbolize events that have or will transpire in reality. Bunyan frequently alludes the physicality of his symbolic writing, and Roger Sharrock has noted 'the concrete strength of the imagery employed in *Grace Abounding*, the manner in which it creates the physical sensation of straining and pushing. But when auditory and tactile sensations are introduced it is as powerful illusions or simply as metaphors.'<sup>399</sup> Norwood's description of actual visitation first by an unseen presence, and later of apparent physical possession, transcends the metaphorical engagement of Bunyan and the writers of comparable spiritual autobiographies and demands the reader accept that this well-travelled,

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<sup>397</sup> James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a justified Sinner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1990, p. 36.

<sup>398</sup> Christopher Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 87.

<sup>399</sup> Roger Sharrock, 'Spiritual Autobiography: Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*' in, Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (eds.), *John Bunyan and his England* (London and Ronserverte: The Hambleton Press) 1990, p. 103.

intelligent, and respected man believes that Satan is not only influencing him at a subconscious level, but is forcibly impelling him to act, leading him into reprobation.

After describing these more general symptoms – nothing more out of the ordinary than the psychological torment like that described in other spiritual autobiographies – Norwood's account, like his predicament, becomes more pronounced and his possession suddenly transcends the mental affliction, and is given physical form; this is worth quoting at length:

Also in bed sometimes pressing sometimes creeping to and fro, sometimes ready to take away my breath, sometimes lifting up the bed, sometimes the pillow, sometimes pulling the cloathes or striking on the bed and on the pillow; sometimes as it were flashing in my head and all my body, sometimes working a strange and stirring fear and amazednes, whether I would or not though I was very firmly resolved against them, and often an expectation of some apparition. Also sometimes as I was walking in the streets my senses grew benumbed and dizzy, and every thing seemed as death or as it were covered with the shadow of death. It seems also he had some power in transforming or deforming my countenance which I was sensible of, and at those times my countenance seemed very strange and deformed to my father and others that knew me well.<sup>400</sup>

Stachniewski's appraisal of these events neatly sums up the way in which Norwood, like his contemporaries, 'often needs to invoke the devil in order to offload the states of mind which belonged to the reprobate'. This would certainly be in keeping with the desperation with which Norwood clings to hope and the absolutist nature of his despair when he does succumb to reprobate temptation, but Stachniewski's comments regarding the physical aspects of Norwood's possession seem to fall short of considering the acute nature of the evidence as Norwood recounts it. He writes that, 'The psychological intensities seem to have been such that they produced objective correlatives, or at least hallucinations which even retrospect

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<sup>400</sup>Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 148.

cannot uncouple from reality'<sup>401</sup>. While this is undeniably true, the same could be said of Bunyan's experiences during his painful and drawn out spiritual conversion and if we are to believe Norwood when he says that his own 'fits with dispair' included levitating beds and a change in physical appearance that was perceptible by others then there certainly seems to be a more violent example of soteriological turmoil on show here. I would argue that Norwood here displays the kind of physical manifestation of perceived spiritual conflict found in the records of dissenting visionaries like the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel whose sensational performances are recorded in her *Anna Trapnel's Report and Plea*.

Anna Trapnel's fame, and in some accounts, her notoriety, stems from two episodes in which she apparently slips into a sustained trance – on one occasion it lasted twelve days – during which she proceeded to recite prophetic verses that provoked the authorities enough to have her arrested. As Elaine Hobby has remarked, 'Her contemporaries might be uncertain whether to perceive her as God's handmaid, or as mad'<sup>402</sup>, and indeed Trapnel was eventually committed to Bridewell where she was to spend eight weeks before being released. Trapnel's narrative, a text she perhaps did not write but certainly approved<sup>403</sup>, describes her trances with exacting detail and the assumption is that the condition is far more than mere performance and that the physicality of the phenomenon is very real:

Then the Lord made his rivers flow, which soon broke down the banks of an ordinary capacity, and extraordinarily mounted my spirits into a praying and singing frame, and so they remained till morning light, as I was told, for I was not capable of that.<sup>404</sup>

The apparently superhuman abilities visited upon Trapnel during these trances would certainly echo what transpires during Norwood's possession and both accounts record the

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<sup>401</sup> John Stachniewski, 'Introduction', *John Bunyan, Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, pp. xxx-xxxi.

<sup>402</sup> Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1649-88* (London: Virago) 1988, p. 34.

<sup>403</sup> See Elspeth Graham et al, *Her Own Life*, p. 75.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid, pp. 75-76.



frightened responses of those who experienced them; and as Fraser points out, ‘The sensational effect of such a daily performance in the heart of Whitehall, so close to the seat of Protectoral power, may be imagined.’<sup>405</sup>

In their discussion of Trapnel, Elspeth Graham et al refer to her as being a ‘passive medium’, and it is this state of spiritual unconsciousness, where God – or in Norwood’s case, the devil – removes any sense of subjective control from the individual that we see a parallel between the hysteria and trances displayed by Trapnel and the most extreme of Norwood’s hallucinations. Norwood writes about how his ‘wonted apprehensions of the joyful presence of Gods holy spirit were turned into an apprehension of the presence of Satan, in soul and body, stirring up horrible blasphemies in my mind, and sundry annoyances in my body,’<sup>406</sup> and it could be argued that this kind of hallucinatory experience is simply a manifestation of the soteriological process, of the conversion experience. The passivity of the afflicted individual presents an obvious parallel with the powerlessness experienced by the observer of predestinarian doctrine and Norwood’s writing at this stage displays a definite sense of physical and emotional helplessness:

Me thought as I looked back I saw my self far entered within the gates of hell, and now if the perculis should be let fall I should be kept in and could no more return, and I feared upon my offer to return the perculis would be presently let fall, such a kind of apprehension I had in my imagination: And indeed I found my self so weak, and so habituated and prone to dispair, and Satan to have gotten such power over me by custom, that I much feared that as soon as he should perceive me about to return, and to lay hold upon the promises (which I had long neglected) he would assail me with all his power and be ready to overwhelm me with utter dispair.<sup>407</sup>

Norwood is here making explicit the terror of reprobation and the effect internalised spiritual tussles had on the nonconformist mind. As Christopher Hill has written, ‘In protestantism the

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<sup>405</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*, p. 313.

<sup>406</sup> *Confessions*, p. 148.

<sup>407</sup> *Confessions*, p. 148.

sense of sin was internalized. Priestly mediators were discarded because each believer had a priest in his own conscience: outward penance and absolution were replaced by inward penitence'<sup>408</sup> and this is certainly what Norwood communicates successfully here. Fear of damnation aside however, the most striking image in the passage quoted above is that of the threat Norwood perceives represented by the portcullis and his powerlessness with regard to keeping it up. By dwelling on this – he mentions the portcullis and how it might 'be let fall' twice in a single sentence – Norwood reiterates his position of passivity and his sense that attainment of election or reprobation are beyond his personal control.

Katharine Hodgkin sees the prophecies of Anna Trapnel as being both uncontrollable and yet positive where 'the pleasure of prophecy in its uncontrolled and unreasoning aspects is powerfully evoked.'<sup>409</sup> Possession is, for Trapnel, a gift – she believed it was passed down to her through her mother – and is the cause of as many positive outcomes as negative ones. Katherine Gillespie has written about this at length and her work casts some aspersions on the 'unconscious' nature of Trapnel's possession:

Trapnel's 'performances' drew an audience and resulted in publication, of both the print and publicity kinds. Crowds gathered at her bedside and filled her doors and windows. A 'relator' took down her words as she delivered such visions as denunciations of Cromwell's Protectorate for being as tyrannical as the monarchical predecessor it has displaced. Interestingly, Trapnel had become a 'public' figure even as she inhabited 'private' spaces and she soon underwent official scrutiny.<sup>410</sup>

Trapnel's very public spiritual possession then enables her to find a wide and enthusiastic audience and even her trial and eventual imprisonment gave her a platform from which she,

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<sup>408</sup> Christopher Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 152.

<sup>409</sup> Katharine Hodgkin, 'Dionys Fitzherbert and the Anatomy of Madness' in Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen and Suzanne Trill (eds.), *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) 1998, p. 88.

<sup>410</sup> Katherine Gillespie, 'Anna Trapnel's Window on the Word: The Domestic Sphere of Public Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Nonconformity', *Bunyan Studies* 7: 1997, p. 51.

like Bunyan, Coppe, Clarkson, was able to continue her antinomian preaching – something she would have otherwise been unable to achieve. Norwood's possession is, conversely, an entirely negative experience both at an individual level and for those unfortunate to experience the events second-hand. His writing when describing the events is bleak and has the tone of despair of someone convinced of their state of reprobation:

Hereupon though in myne own apprehension I seemed to be wholly both body and soul in the hands of Satan and no ways able to move or help my self yet the Lord enabled me to desire earnestly to renounce and detest Satan... At last overcoming the disease and being quite awake, my feeling smelling and relishing being annoyed as it were with some loathsome thing, there being a kind of noise and the bed rising up in sundry places, and in several places the cloathes being pressed down heavy, with being removed or I removing from that the place became very chill; so was my whole body after I awaked, also the ayre seemed to strike here and there, sometimes upon me, sometimes upon the bed.<sup>411</sup>

It is interesting to note that Norwood stresses the state of consciousness in which he experiences these phenomena; that he does differentiate between his unconscious and waking experience makes the physical manifestation of the soteriological conflict all the more explicit. Nowhere in *Grace Abounding* or in Agnes Beaumont's *Persecutions* does such a perceived physical effect arise from the conversion process. Bunyan experiences miraculous interventions and is tempted by external forces but never writes of such an extreme and such a tangible attack on his person. Such is the impact of these events, Norwood eventually goes so far as to have a friend (one Mr Clitheroe) share his bed with the result that the man 'shreeked out often with fear and pertubation' and Norwood, concluding that the house was haunted, moves away, again distancing himself physically from the external source of his soteriological malady. The distance Norwood places between himself and his 'haunted' house brings to mind of course his other geographical displacements, particularly the

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<sup>411</sup> *Confessions*, p. 149.

pilgrimage to Rome, and there is a real sense that his failure to negotiate grand narratives like predestination, the conversion process, and his elect status, sees him develop extreme emotional and physical responses like the protestations of possession and leaves few options open to him other than adjusting his physical position.

### **Conclusion: Richard Norwood's use of the Spiritual Autobiography**

Richard Norwood's experiential life was markedly different to those of the other writers under consideration in this study. He travelled as far as most Englishmen ever had done, made major contributions to science and mathematics, and had a varied career during which he interacted on equal terms with individuals from the widest mix of cultural and economic backgrounds. Such was the domineering effect of predestinarian doctrine however, he shares, despite this cosmopolitan existence, the same turbulent extremes of hope and despair experienced by every prospective saint. His spiritual autobiography certainly charts his spiritual progress but, like Bunyan, Beaumont, and Clarkson, it also reveals a great deal more about Norwood the individual and the culture in which he existed.

The most noticeable difference between Norwood's *Confessions* and a work like *Grace Abounding* or Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found* is its autobiographical scope. With *Confessions*, Norwood examines not only his soteriological standing, but his wider experiences – particularly his travels. Salvation is not necessarily the central foundation upon which his narrative was composed; it is a preoccupation, and its influence extends to every aspect of his life, but there is a definite sense that Norwood's primary reason for writing an autobiography was to tell his life story. Like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Norwood's

extraordinary experiential life both tests his soteriological faith and is also a manifestation of his spirituality. Norwood is similarly abandoned on a remote island while charting the Bermudas although, unlike Crusoe, Norwood volunteers to explore the island alone in search of food and water, again choosing geographical displacement and solitude as if to test his will.

Defoe's unfortunate autobiographer is of course a victim of circumstance, Norwood instead allowing himself to be marooned. Crusoe's appraisal of his circumstance is, however, illustrative initially of the kind of despondency that flavours the classic model of spiritual autobiography; as Crusoe records in his journal:

I poor miserable *Robinson Crusoe*, being shipwreck'd, during a dreadful storm, in the offing, came on shore on this dismal unfortunate island, which I call'd *The Island Despair*, all the rest of the ship's company being drown'd, and my self almost dead.<sup>412</sup>

Although fictional, Defoe's prose closely follows that of Norwood:

... til then I never seemed to understand what misery was... now I thought I would rather suffer any thing then to be deprived of human society.<sup>413</sup>

Where the texts diverge of course is in the protagonist's state of mind after the initial realisation of circumstance. Perhaps because of his inflated egotism (something alluded to already in this study as well as by Norwood himself) or because of a genuine desire for human society, Norwood's reaction is one of abject horror and the events appear to add nothing to his conversion narrative but evidence of reprobation:

The next morning when I purposed to depart the wind was come to the northeast directly against me and blew very hard – and so continued five days that I could not go, this five days seemed to me the most tedious and miserable time that ever I

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<sup>412</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 2003, p. 57.

<sup>413</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 141.

underwent in all my life... yet I had victuals sufficient, only I seemed as banished from human society and knew not how long it might last. Yet at other times I was apt to retire my self much from company, but at this time I thought it one of the great punishments in the world, yea, I thought it was one of the greatest punishments in hell, and the sense and apprehension of it made me to think of hell as of hell indeed, a condition most miserable.<sup>414</sup>

That Norwood's horror at imposed physical solitude should be so acute raises a point made by Donald Davie who asks, 'Which is the more characteristically Calvinist response – Cowper's seeing the solitude of Alexander Selkirk [the model for Defoe's fictional protagonist] as the worst of all possible privations, or Defoe's Crusoe exulting in it, as the condition of his autonomy?'<sup>415</sup>. It is important to note here the textual difference between Defoe and Norwood, specifically the manner of the individual's respective abandonment. Whereas Crusoe is the victim of a shipwreck – of which he is the only survivor – Norwood volunteers to land upon his own 'desert island' in search of food after the ship upon which he is travelling is struck by a series of calamities. Indeed, becoming trapped on the island is only the most recent in a catalogue of unfortunate events and it is easy to understand Norwood's despair. Crusoe's survival begins to look like providence, Norwood's, an indication of how far from salvation he really is. The episode underlines the sentiment expressed during Norwood's expedition to Rome in that the further he moves away from England, the more untenable his spiritual life becomes. Crusoe is able to strengthen his faith over the course of twenty-six years during which he receives both unexpected companionship and confirmation of his soteriological state; after just five days of confinement, Norwood is as despondent as ever.

Watkins is correct in his assertion that Norwood is too reliant upon an isolated piety, something akin to monasticism, that he imposes solitude upon himself as if forcibly to

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<sup>414</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions*, p. 141.

<sup>415</sup> Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church* (London), 1978, p. 9.

detach himself from the fear of temptation. He writes that, 'Even after conversion [Norwood] handicapped himself for some time by trying to go it alone: he under-valued public worship and neglected the company of other believers'<sup>416</sup>, but I would argue that Norwood's insistence on self-imposed solitude – something borne out by his volunteering to visit the island on which he becomes marooned – is more a means of setting strict spiritual boundaries wherein the possibility of reprobation becomes impossible. Watkins goes on to conclude that:

Everything in his story, then, shows how a man's personality develops through constant interaction between his inward self and his environment, and each throws light on the other. As we read of Norwood's struggle to unify his spiritual experience and the external pattern of his life, the figures of the pilgrim and the castaway begin to take shape, although not until Bunyan and Defoe were these figures to be clearly defined as characteristic projections of Puritan experience.<sup>417</sup>

Again I would disagree slightly with Watkins here in that, although Norwood's misadventures would tend to suggest affinity with the archetypes of the pilgrim and castaway, the circumstances surrounding his journey to Rome (among his other travels) and his week-long entrapment upon the island as well as his temperament lead me to suggest that Norwood is far less pious than the puritan caricatures he appears to emulate or prefigure.

It is interesting to note then that of the four spiritual autobiographies I have chosen to look at Norwood's boasts the most convincing evidence of election. By the end of his narrative Norwood seems comfortable with his spiritual standing and is able to reflect upon the positive impact of God's grace and the desperate plight he feels he has escaped:

But it may be yea it is most likely that these losses have bene gain to me, and have prevented far greater losses and dangers that might have befallen me some other

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<sup>416</sup> Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, p. 78.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

ways, I might have bene left to some scandalous and shameful fall for the mortifying of spiritual pride, and I may justly conceive, that such a thing would have befallen me at one time or other, considering my desperate and precipitate disposition to sin in temptation. But the Lord was pleased rather to use this medicine.<sup>418</sup>

He is acutely aware of his tendency to revert to reprobate behaviour when left to his own devices and he reiterates his dependence upon external influence – in this case, the positive influence of God. Norwood has been a spectator to some extent during the conversion experience, his reactivity with regard to spiritual matters at odds with a decisive and to some extent successful secular life. That said though, it would appear by the conclusion of *Confessions* that Norwood is content to accept the metanarrative of election and is more than willing to situate himself within a state of soteriological assurance.

It would appear that this situation represents a clash of phrase regimens. On the one hand Norwood is buffeted by conflicting phrases he recognises as being the word of God and of Satan. These domineering grand narratives cause Norwood to behave in more and more outlandish ways during which he struggles with, and indeed fails, to reconcile himself to the acute emotional and spiritual turbulence these forces engender. The resulting differends lead to his geographical displacement, spiritual uncertainty, and extreme physical and psychological manifestations of the predestinarian obsession with election and reprobation. On the other hand, there is Norwood's pliability, his willingness to be swayed by the voices in his head that lead him to act in such a contrary manner. Through this miasma of competing narratives and differends though, Norwood finds – or is at least convinced of – confirmation of salvation and, as illustrated in the quotation above, this represents fully the Calvinist doctrine of predestinarian logic in that his election is assured in spite of his secular shortcomings.

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<sup>418</sup> *Confessions*, p. 154.



Norwood's use of the spiritual autobiography dissents from many of the assumptions attributed to the genre. By shifting the focus of the narrative from an internal self-examination to a wider contextual arena Norwood succeeds in writing a recognisably modern autobiography that presents his life as a whole instead of a single-minded, obsessive document of election, and it is perhaps because of this his soteriological state remains relatively convincing.

Competing phrase regimens, little narratives that prevent soteriological truth in all of the radical dissenters interrogated here, are for Norwood catalysts not just for introspective self-scrutiny but also for extreme geographical displacement as a means of coping with a spiritual differend. Of the four examples of spiritual autobiography here Clarkson chose a svelte approach to questions of soteriology, Beaumont used signs of election to counteract societal persecution, Bunyan remained insular and experienced turbulent psychological crises without satisfactory evidence of grace, but Norwood's application of predestinarian doctrine brought with it a physical response including removing himself from the perceived crisis – the antithesis of svelteness. Norwood's *Confessions* illustrates the incommensurability of the spiritual predicament faced by its author. His spiritual autobiography reflects this and describes the effects of the state I see as being analogous to one of differend on both his spiritual standing, and his extraordinary secular life.

## **‘... after many a sad and weary journey’: Conclusion**

This thesis began with a ‘what if’. What implications would arise from a postmodern reading of four spiritual autobiographies written by dissenting nonconformists from the mid-seventeenth century? Where would such a reading – informed by Jean-Francois Lyotard’s theoretical insight into what he described as *The Postmodern Condition* – situate such seemingly implacable grand narratives as Calvinist predestination, the conversion experience, and, crucially, that most elusive of Puritan obsessions during this period, evidence of salvation? In what sense would assumptions regarding the genre of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography be challenged and what fresh insight into the period could be gained from this kind of reading?

By interrogating the work of four writers, all of whom embody aspects of mid-seventeenth century Puritanism, this study has shown that a mood analogous to one of postmodernism existed during the English Revolution and that this mood informed the spiritual writing of men and women on the fringes of radical nonconformist sectarianism. Each of the writers under consideration here have been shown to contribute in some way to a general distrust of grand narratives – whether in terms of religion, society, or domestic situation – and lend themselves to serious theoretical scrutiny. In the case of three of these figures such close reading is in itself original since so little attention has been paid to them in studies of the literature of the period and they remain for the most part addenda to more widely read contemporaries. My reading of John Bunyan has built on theoretical studies by

Tamsin Spargo, Stuart Sim, and David Walker but has asked more of Bunyan in terms of how he reacts to the shifting phrase regimens evident in *Grace Abounding* and how his spiritual autobiography is no less incommensurable in its adherence to predestinarian doctrine than Laurence Clarkson's more explicitly svelte *Lost Sheep Found*.

The lack of legitimacy suffered by Bunyan, and recorded with unflinching honesty in *Grace Abounding*, is a symptom resulting from the differend he experiences when confronted by the incommensurable conflict arising from his adherence to strict predestinarian doctrine and the ultimately futile search for evidence of election that such belief engenders. It is worth remembering that Lyotard has posited that:

Incommensurability, in the sense of the heterogeneity of phrase regimens and of the impossibility of subjecting them to a single law (except by neutralizing them), also marks the relation between either cognitives or prescriptives and interrogatives, performatives, exclamatives... For each of these regimens, there corresponds a mode of presenting a universe, and one mode is not translatable into another.<sup>419</sup>

This study has illustrated how the impossibility of a dominant grand narrative – something Bunyan and indeed all radically dissenting nonconformists strive to attain in the form of spiritual election – leads writers of spiritual autobiographies into self-defeating self-scrutiny that, rather than confirming election or reprobation, only perpetuates a continual stream of conflicted phrase regimens that allows no sense of certainty; an assumed grand narrative is here supplanted by heterogeneous little narratives that allow no rule of judgement. Lyotard's criticism of Jürgen Habermas is worth citing here since the conflict between a call for unity and a belief in the incommensurability of the possibility of that unity resonates with the predicament Bunyan finds himself in. Lyotard writes that:

Jürgen Habermas (everyone had recognised him) thinks that if modernity has failed, it is in allowing the totality of life to be splintered into independent specialities which are left to the narrow competence of experts, while the concrete individual experiences “desublimated meaning” and “deconstructed form”, not as a liberation

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<sup>419</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 128.

but in the mode of that immense *ennui* which Baudelaire described over a century ago.<sup>420</sup>

As an analogy to Bunyan's state of mind in *Grace Abounding*, this passage would appear to be particularly apt. Lyotard's project in which he encourages the development of pluralism and 'little narrative' as a means of liberation is certainly analogous to the situation surrounding the nonconformist sects; Lyotard's scepticism towards the possibility of cultural unity is similarly very much applicable to my reading of spiritual autobiography given the general lack of resolution at the end of the texts examined here.

It has been demonstrated that Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* exemplifies the notion that a lack of legitimacy undermines the grand narrative of predestinarian doctrine and that the most enduring of the nonconformist spiritual autobiographies presents an irreconcilable differend in place of a lucid sense of soteriological certainty. In a recent study, Michael Davies would appear to refute this argument when he writes that:

Far from being a random sequence of unconnected experiences, impossible to fathom or to follow by convert and reader alike, *Grace Abounding* can be read according to a lucid process of salvation, charting the sinning believer's journey from a guilt-ridden state of enslavement under the covenant of law and works (according to the terms of Bunyan's covenant theology) to the liberty offered by a covenant of grace, faith in which brings blessed release for Bunyan from incarcerating fears and doubts.<sup>421</sup>

Davies's insistence upon there being a 'blessed release' for Bunyan would seem to be a questionable position given Bunyan's uncertainty about his chances of salvation at the end of *Grace Abounding*. Assumptions regarding the success of Bunyan's conversion process endure in such an argument despite the fear and doubt he admits to having experienced after receiving apparent confirmation of election. 'When I would do good, evil is present with me'<sup>422</sup> Bunyan writes at the very end of his spiritual autobiography, spelling out in explicit terms the lack of conviction he still experiences with regard to predestination, and showing

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<sup>420</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 72.

<sup>421</sup> Michael Davies, 'Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners: John Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography', in Anne Dunan-Page (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>422</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1962, p. 103.

how he is unable to reconcile himself to faith in an uncertain spiritual position. Davies concedes that Bunyan's predicament is a tenuous one, suggesting his prose in *Grace Abounding* 'performs a high-wire balancing act'<sup>423</sup> as he struggles with acute inner conflict but whereas he is satisfied with Bunyan's spiritual resolution, I see the situation as being indeterminate and symptomatic of the competing phrase regimens that compel Bunyan to conclude his narrative with an air of uncertainty.

I share the view of Stuart Sim and David Walker who 'backdate' Lyotard's postmodern theories onto seventeenth-century literature and posit that 'Bunyan's writings exist within, and are responses to, a breakdown of grand narrative and the crisis of legitimacy that it leaves in its wake'<sup>424</sup> but my own study built upon this position and claimed that Bunyan's differends are self-perpetuating, that he is unconsciously supplanting a coveted grand narrative with innumerable little narratives that render any notion of authority, in the form of predestinarian doctrine, for example, impossible. Rather than being a conscious (svelte) response to spiritual conformism, I see Bunyan's spiritual autobiography as an attempt to make sense of conflicted phrases, to construct its own grand narrative. The differend arises from the lack of spiritual authority Bunyan experiences.

Fredric Jameson's sceptical response to the postmodern reminds us of the problems associated with this kind of radical reading and it is worth reiterating here his comments on both Lyotard's 'ingenious twist, or swerve'<sup>425</sup> on the cultural and historical characteristics of postmodernism and on what he sees as the limitations of postmodern thinking:

[Postmodernism] either "expresses" some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted a fashion) or effectively "represses" and diverts it, depending on the side of the ambiguity you happen to favour. Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Michael Davies, 'Grace Abounding', p. 71.

<sup>424</sup> Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority*, p. 15.

<sup>425</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso) 1991, p. 60.

<sup>426</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. ix.

Although Jameson expresses doubts concerning the validity of the reactionary tendencies of this theoretical tradition, his position exemplifies, in many ways, the point I make about Bunyan's soteriological differend: Bunyan does become obsessed by his 'own condition of possibility' regarding evidence of his election and Jameson's criticisms of postmodernism would appear ultimately to justify this particular reading. The notion of theoretical repression and/or diversion certainly mirrors the spiritual stalemate experienced by Bunyan and indeed all of the radical nonconformist writers of spiritual autobiographies examined here and even though Jameson is attacking the work of Lyotard and other postmodern commentators, his reading of them only highlights the slippery nature of authority, of certainty, in all of these texts.

Agnes Beaumont's *Narrative* begins with an affirmation of grace but ends with an extraordinary declaration of spiritual uncertainty. This deterioration of faith in election is all the more startling in the case of Beaumont because of her otherwise exemplary attitude toward her spiritual position throughout her narrative, even when faced with the trials and persecutions alluded to in the title of her spiritual autobiography. For Beaumont the differend arising from the conversion process is well defined and presented in stark language that allows no fudging of the issue. She begins by celebrating her experiences 'since I was awakened'<sup>427</sup> – establishing in the first sentence her absolute belief in her elect status – and concludes with this enigmatic phrase: 'Thus I have told you of the good and evil things that I met with in that dispensation. I wish I was as well in my soul as I was then.'<sup>428</sup> The shift in tone from authority to uncertainty is palpable.

This dramatic revelation is crucial to our understanding of predestinarian doctrine in nonconformist England and in particular, the effect it had on those seeking evidence of grace.

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<sup>427</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 37.

<sup>428</sup> *Narrative*, p. 83.

Readings of Beaumont however, appear to ignore her wavering conclusion and, as we have seen in studies of *Grace Abounding* assume the dominance of the soteriological grand narrative. Sheila Ottway describes Beaumont's narrative as being 'above all a testimony of religious faith, intended to demonstrate the way in which God favours the truly faithful by coming to their aid in times of trouble.'<sup>429</sup> This is certainly true of the majority of the text but that final sentiment surely casts doubt upon everything Beaumont believes – she apparently no longer counts herself among the 'truly faithful' by the end of her narrative and since there exists no other testimony regarding her later spiritual position we can only speculate as to her final position of faith.

Patricia L. Bell, inadvertently perhaps, draws attention to the lack of legitimacy in Beaumont's spiritual autobiography when she writes that:

A past orthodoxy read this as a tale of a young girl meeting persecution for her faith. Today's orthodoxy sees her as helped by a radical faith to defy a patriarchal society. Neither explanation seems quite to fit the facts.<sup>430</sup>

This observation could very easily be applied to the genre of spiritual autobiography as a whole. Ostensibly written as autobiographical testament regarding evidence of individual salvation, in truth these narratives present a number of competing phrase regimens that undermine to a greater extent the Calvinist predestinarian doctrine to which dissenting Puritans desperately wanted to reconcile themselves. That assumptions regarding the authority of spiritual autobiography can be questioned at all raises considerable doubt about the stability of individual faith within the culture of nonconformity in Restoration England. The conversion experience can no longer be seen as a dominant grand narrative.

I approached Laurence Clarkson's *Lost Sheep Found* from a specific theoretical position, that of Lyotard's notion of svelteness. The 'metamorphic capacity' of the svelte individual is entirely applicable when interrogating a text such as that written by Clarkson

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<sup>429</sup> Sheila Ottway, 'Autobiography', in Anita Pacheco (ed.) *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) 2002, p. 242.

<sup>430</sup> Patricia L. Bell, 'Agnes Beaumont of Edworth', p. 26.

and this study presented his spiritual journey through seven distinct sects as exemplifying Lyotard's call for flexibility. Whereas I have demonstrated how John Bunyan's soteriological growth became stunted by a self-perpetuating clash of phrase regimens, and Beaumont's apparent state of election was ultimately one of uncertainty, Clarkson, although similarly devoid of spiritual assurance by the conclusion of his spiritual autobiography, applies an undeniably svelte approach to the predestinarian obsession with election and reprobation. This in itself presents its own difficulties however and for Clarkson the conversion process is perhaps more protracted because of his willingness to adapt to circumstance.

This reading builds upon the work of among others, A.L. Morton, whose own conclusions prefigure to some extent my own position but fail to explore the soteriological uncertainty evident in Clarkson's spiritual autobiography. Morton writes of Clarkson's final reinvention as a Muggletonian as representing 'Clarkson's "Journeys end", the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel not as something in the utopian future but as a present reality. In the doctrine of the Two Seeds he found another thought common to many of the sects given a new and, to him, completely satisfactory form.'<sup>431</sup> That Clarkson's final spiritual position was merely 'satisfactory' highlights the flexibility he adopts as part of his strikingly individual pilgrimage as well as the lack of spiritual authority this position adopts.

The unconvincing 'Journeys end' shown in Clarkson's spiritual autobiography – the entire conversion process in fact – is worth comparing to Lyotard's discussion of Genre in *The Differend* primarily because it displays a similarly slippery quality and lends an insistence to the conflict experienced by the author as well as by the reader who is presumably anticipating a satisfactory predestinarian conclusion. Lyotard posits that 'a phrase that comes along is put into play within a conflict between genres of discourse. This

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<sup>431</sup> A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p. 139.



conflict is a differend, since the success (or the validation) proper to one genre is not the one proper to others,<sup>432</sup> and this sense of layered conflict would seem to be exemplified in *Lost Sheep Found*. Clarkson's svelte mechanism is his method of resolving (although his success is fleeting and inevitably leads to further differends) this discourse, of imposing a grand narrative. His failure to achieve this only reinforces the confusion arising from the existence of competing discourses that are in this instance represented by the culture of nonconformity in which Clarkson and the other figures under examination here are immersed.

Lyotard goes on to assert that:

The multiplicity of stakes, on a par with the multiplicity of genres, turns every linkage into a kind of "victory" of one of them over the others. These others remain neglected, forgotten, or repressed possibilities. There is no need to adduce some will or some intention to describe that. It suffices to pay attention to this: there is only one phrase "at a time" [à la fois]. There are many possible linkings (or genres), but only one actual or current "time".<sup>433</sup>

The limitation of having a current dominant phrase (among a myriad of conflicted and neglected ones) explains to some extent the necessity of and the ease with which Clarkson is able to turn aside from a succession of sects (phrases) and adopt new doctrine apparently at will. The svelte coping mechanism deployed by Clarkson is problematic and results in a lack of spiritual closure similar to that experienced by all the writers of spiritual autobiographies in this study. *Lost Sheep Found* epitomises the uncertainty surrounding spiritual legitimation experienced by radical dissenters and communicated through their spiritual autobiographies.

The fluidity of religious authority is particularly evident in Richard Norwood's *Confessions*, a text that is dominated by the notion of the current phrase and an attendant differend. Norwood is acutely aware of his tenuous spiritual position and employs perhaps the most radical method with which to remove himself from the temptations of reprobation. Where Clarkson found temporary solace with an incredible succession of dissenting sects,

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<sup>432</sup> *The Differend*, p. 136.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136.

Norwood adopted a very insular approach and instead placed vast geographical distance between himself and his spiritual crises. In a sense, Norwood's behaviour parallels the psychological turbulence experienced by Bunyan although in this case his painful conversion experience leads him to travel vast distances and to increasingly exotic environments as if to stall the onset of spiritual doubt. Rather than the sveltiness seen in Clarkson, Norwood's malaise looks more like a refusal to accept the extreme doubt, fear, and uncertainty associated with Calvinist predestinarian doctrine. As John Stachniewski has written:

A deterrent to conversion for Norwood is the Calvinist doctrine of "perseverance": the elect, once converted, could not fall away. The fearful distance Norwood keeps from God is partly motivated by the anticipation of relapse. This would then expose him as the recipient of a "calling not effectual" or a "temporary conversion".<sup>434</sup>

In his attempt to avoid too much in the way of self-scrutiny – an act that could expose any potential possibility of his reprobate state – Norwood travels on foot to Rome, exposes himself to a variety of potentially fatal situations, not least two outbreaks of plague, and is stranded on an island while travelling through the Bermudas. These actions show Norwood to have displayed the deepest uncertainty about his soteriological prospects and, given that the eventual outcome is as lacking in authority as that of the other figures I have examined, undermines assumptions about the genre of spiritual autobiography generally.

Norwood's relatively privileged upbringing and later cosmopolitan life that allowed him to travel and experience so much of the world illustrates the democratic nature of the spiritual turmoil suffered by adherents of nonconformist belief. The little narratives that frustrate Norwood's attempts at soteriological certainty are as insistent as those that prevent Bunyan from ever declaring absolute faith in his election and those that still haunt Agnes Beaumont, despite the many affirmations she presents during the course of her eventful early

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<sup>434</sup> John Stachniewski, 'Introduction', *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xxx.

life. The conflicted genres of discourse to which Lyotard alludes in his *The Differend* are evident in each of these spiritual autobiographies.

Each of the four writers examined in this study employs the Puritan model of spiritual autobiography and uses that model to communicate a different form of dissent. Although in the case of Beaumont and Clarkson the classic model associated with this genre is radically altered by the author, Bunyan and Norwood both, ostensibly at least, adhere to the accepted structural norms of the conversion narrative and yet crucially, all four writers fail to convey a sense of soteriological certainty through their writing. In this regard I have demonstrated how the notion of a 'classic model' of spiritual autobiography is in itself worthy of debate given that the foremost exponent of this seventeenth-century mode does not fulfil the criteria of proven evidence of election.

John Bunyan attaches an acutely personal and self-perpetuating sense of spiritual doubt to what is supposed to be an affirmation of grace; Agnes Beaumont employs the form as a literary tool to communicate her astonishing domestic dissent from a patriarchal hegemony and in the process uses her spiritual autobiography to record her assumption of a position of power that allows her to undermine a number of dominant authorities; Laurence Clarkson reimagines the grand narrative of the conversion experience as a series of conversion *processes* none of which are definitive; Richard Norwood demonstrates, through his *Confessions* how spiritual turmoil can manifest itself as a series of extreme physical, tangible, symptoms that create a barrier to soteriological fulfillment. All of these texts illustrate the differend that arises from Calvinist predestinarian doctrine as adopted by members of dissenting sects and congregations, and demonstrate how conflicting phrase regimens represented by internal doubt and external circumstance prevent the spiritual authority of the conversion experience from being an absolute state.

This reading has raised a number of questions regarding the impact spiritual autobiography had on later literary developments, particularly the Novel which has long been seen as an extension of the Puritan version of the form. As Ian Watt indicated in *The Rise of the Novel*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* brings us 'close to the inward moral being of the individual; and it achieves this closeness to the inner life of the protagonist by using as formal basis the autobiographical memoir.'<sup>435</sup> This study suggested that the overriding sense of doubt, the uncertainty, left in the wake of spiritual autobiographies is similarly transferred into the novels that were inspired by them. Moll Flanders's 'conversion', in which she and her husband 'resolved to spend the Remainder of our Years in sincere Penitence, for the wicked Lives we have lived'<sup>436</sup> is as downbeat a conclusion as Agnes Beaumont's jarring retraction of her confidence in her election: 'I wish I was as well in my soul as I was then'<sup>437</sup>. Beaumont's revelation certainly brings to mind the end of Defoe's *Roxana* where the heroine finishes her narrative with a very similar sentiment: 'after some few Years of flourishing, and outwardly happy Circumstances, I fell into a dreadful Course of Calamities'<sup>438</sup>. It could be speculated that a reassessment of the aims and successes of spiritual autobiography such as I have begun here might impact significantly upon our understanding of the literary developments that grew out of them, and surely this would be a rich avenue for further study.

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<sup>435</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 75.

<sup>436</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, ed. David Blewett (Harmondsworth: Penguin) 1989, p. 427.

<sup>437</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, p. 83.

<sup>438</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*, p. 379.

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